SYNOPSIS

The author, during his youth, witnessed the scenes of a mine explosion and saw the burned and torn bodies of twenty-four dead miners lying side by side. The horrible aspect led him to research and inquire into other state mine explosions such as Monongah, Eccles, etc. In later years he set to compiling all facts about these tragedies and put them into book form.

His research shows that West Virginia has suffered over one hundred major tragedies—five or more deaths constitute a major accident—with an approximate total of twenty-four hundred victims. The contents relate the accident, the scenes at the mine mouth, attempts at rescue, the retrieving of the victims, human-interest incidents, and the names of the dead.

The author visited the places where these explosions occurred and got much information from the old-timers and eyewitnesses. However, the bulk of the author's information came from newspaper accounts of the day.

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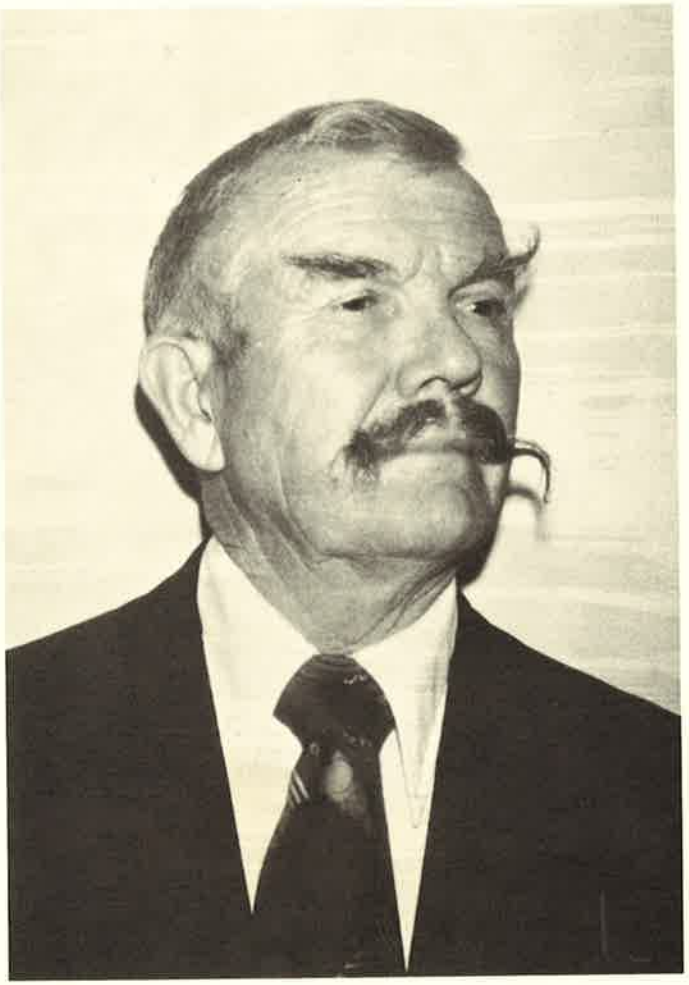

The Author

They Died in the Darkness

By Lacy A. Dillon

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Contents

Preface vii
Acknowledgments ix
References xi
1. Newburg—January 21, 1886 1
2. Red Ash—March 6, 1900 12
3. Algoma—September 15, 1902 18
4. Rush Run-Red Ash—March 19, 1905 21
5. Coaldale—January 4, 1906 26
6. Detroit—January 18, 1906 41
7. Parral—February 8, 1906 47
8. Century—March 22, 1906 51
9. Stuart—January 29, 1907 55
10. Thomas—February 4, 1907 61
11. Whipple—May 1, 1907 65
12. Monongah—December 6, 1907 68
13. Lick Branch, First—December 29, 1908 93
14. Second Lick Branch Explosion—January 12, 1909 .. 97
15. Elk Garden—April 24, 1911 105
16. Bottom Creek—November 18, 1911 109
17. Jed—March 26, 1912 112
18. First Eccles—April 28, 1914 120
19. Carlisle—February 6, 1915 136
20. Layland—March 2, 1915 139
21. Boomer—November 30, 1915 151
22. Yukon—December 15, 1917 157
23. Glen Rogers—November 6, 1923 160
24. Second Yukon—March 28, 1924 167
25. Benwood—April 28, 1924 170
26. Barrackville—March 17, 1925 176
27. Farmington—January 14, 1926 183

28. Second Eccles—March 8, 1926 190
29. Everettville—April 30, 1927 196
30. Yukon—May 22, 1928 205
31. First Macbeth—September 2, 1936 209
Second Macbeth—March 11, 1937 212
32. Bartley—January 10, 1940 216
33. Osage—May 12, 1942 229
34. Pursglove—July 9, 1942 234
35. Lumberport—March 22, 1944 237
36. Havaco—January 15, 1946 241
37. Farmington—November 13, 1954 246
38. Bishop—February 4, 1957 250
39. Second Bishop—October 27, 1958 255
40. Craigsville—October 28, 1958 261
41. Holden—March 8, 1960 263
42. Dola—April 25, 1963 267
43. Farmington—November 20, 1968 271

Preface

Since controls over coal mining have become strict and experience has taught the industry how to avoid gross mine tragedies, the chances for such past holocausts are hoped to be history. The purpose of this book is to narrate the accounts, scenes, and events of the worst of these explosions that occurred in the state of West Virginia, who suffered the most from such accidents.

The accounts of these horrors are not to condemn nor to blame those in charge of the industry nor the state government inspectors who, at times, may have been lax or coerced politically and looked the other way when dangerous situations prevailed, hoping that such conditions would go away. In some such cases, the mine blew up and many men died.

The writer of this series of tragedies witnessed the scenes and events at a mine site when twenty-seven men had perished deep under the earth. He saw the victims being brought up on the cage, carried on stretchers to the lamp house, and laid out side by side to be viewed and identified. The sight of these twenty-four dead men—three were not there since they were mutilated and put into corpse baskets in pieces—in all the grotesqueness and smells of burnt flesh and scorched hair, left a lasting picture in his mind. No woman has ever been recorded as dying in a mine blast in this state, only one case of a non-working miner is listed as being caught in an explosion (Eccles, 1914). More foreign born have died in these chapters recorded than American born. At Monongah the percent of foreigners ran nearly 80 percent, while at Benwood, 1924, only about 10 men of the 119 who died were American born. Black men were in heavy percentage killed in the state's southern mines, but small in numbers in northern

counties. Elk Garden (1911) had no blacks, while First Lick Branch had mostly blacks in the list of victims. Algoma, 1902, were all black but two.

One chapter only in this series has fictional characters. In the Coaldale account, the Country Store, Ellen, the pretty girl of Hungarian descent, her father, brother, the cook, Mattie, the superintendent, and the first person narrator are fictional. However, all facts, figures, incidents, and persons are true and accurate to the best of the writer's knowledge.

McDowell County, the most southern county of the state, had the largest number of explosions, while Fayette County in the north-central part of the state came in second. Marion County had the most casualties because of the Monongah blast that killed more men than any explosion in the Americas.

Of the forty-three explosions listed here (actually forty-four since the two Macbeth chapters were combined), more occurred on Tuesday than any other day of the week with Thursday coming in second. The month of March had more than any other period with January the second largest in number. None happened in June or August while one only—Pursglove—happened in July. The first decade of the century was the state's worst ten years with the years of 1906 and 1907 being the bad years.

Acknowledgments

Adams, June, Congressman Ken Hechler's office, Beckley, West Virginia.
Amick, Dorothy, librarian, Beckley Newspaper Corporation.
Ashcraft, John, chief of West Virginia Department of Mines.
Blaylock, Sam, retired mine foreman, Eccles No. 5 Mine.
Coulter, Adrian, Osage, rescue man to locate first victims of the Osage explosion.
DePollo, John, merchant, Thomas, knew facts of the Thomas explosion.
Derenge, William, Quinwood, resaved from Eccles No. 6 after explosion, 1914, and Layland blast March 1915.
Durr, W. B., knew history of Newburg, Newburg, West Virginia.
Farley, Palmer, Beckley newspapers.
Frazier, Charles, Newburg, retired railroad man.
Fullen, Clay, Monongah, worked with undertakers to prepare bodies after Monongah tragedy.
Gauldin, Leonard, in charge of Congressman Hechler's Beckley office, Beckley, West Virginia.
Griffith, Kelly, Glen Rogers, present at Glen Rogers explosion.
Hawkins, Reverend John J., formerly of Farmington, Ravencliff, West Virginia.
Hechler, Ken, congressman, Fourth District, West Virginia.
Hugart, Howard, rescued from Layland explosion, 1915.
Lawson, Vernon W., Sophia, West Virginia, retired state mine inspector aided with the rescue at Dola.
Murak, Mike, Yolyn, West Virginia, worked at Macbeth mine forty-two years. He also aided in the rescue after both explosions.

Nichols, Robert W., former mayor of Monongah.
Perdue, A. B., Princeton, lived at Coaldale at time of explosion.
Price, Mrs. Elmer L., typist of total manuscript, Saulsville, West Virginia.
White, A. H., Beckley, West Virginia, retired foreman from Bartley Mine.

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Raleigh *Herald*
Raleigh *Register*
The Times-West Virginian
Welch *Daily News*
West Virginia Department of Archives and History
West Virginia Department of Mines
West Virginia Heritage, Vol. 2
Wheeling *Intelligencer*

Chapter 1

This One a First

Newburg

January 21, 1886

There is a first in everything and the calamity at Newburg in 1886 was West Virginia's initiation into the horrors of mine disasters, a thing she was to suffer from in the next century more than any other state in the Union.

West Virginia was born during the pain of the Civil War and inherited vast oceans of bituminous coal which made her the richest in potential and the saddest in tragedy; and a mine explosion killed thirty-nine of her humans in the twinkle of an eye on that cold January afternoon at a small town just twelve miles east of Grafton. This was her first big one. Forty-two major ones and many small such fires were to come within the next ninety years.

The Mountain Brook shaft of Orrel Coal Company was sunk in 1884-85 to a depth of 355 feet, the deepest in the state at that time. The company was a Baltimore concern, typical of the pattern set in which the state's wealth would be owned by out-of-the-state interests.

At the time of the blast, the haulageways and entries were not driven very far from the shaft bottom, the farthest distance being only 1,200 feet, and one 600 feet with cross headings. The mine had not been in operation long enough to have miles of entries and a big number of men working inside.

It was on a Thursday at 2:45, January 21st., 1886, (Stonewall Jackson's birthday) when a rumbling sound like low, rolling thunder followed by a slight earth tremor proved to be an underground explosion. Then a dense column of smoke came out of the shaft mouth followed by a blue flame of fire which engulfed the whole mouth of the shaft for an instant and then died. Then simultaneously with the report, boards, timbers, and debris of the derrick house flew through the smoke. Then all was quiet.[1]

The mine was on the west end of town just south of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. Soon afterwards, the whole town was there, but they could only see the shaft mouth—dark, gloomy, and silent—telling a horrible story. A large crowd was milling about, alarmed, shocked, and horrified. A mass of wailing relatives surged about the black vertical hole hoping for some word about the safety of their loved ones. Soon the area was roped off to keep the crowds out of the way until some rescue efforts could be made. Policemen were soon on hand to help hold back the people and the reporters.

In those days, much coal was coked in open and wasteful beehive ovens. These coke ovens stood near the pit mouth in two long rows and continuously gave off black smoke, soot, and sulfuric odors. In this case, the crowd became grimy, shocked, and pitiful as the women's and children's faces became dirty, soot-covered, and streaked by tears.

Men, familiar with mining, talked in low whispers, knowing the chance of any man surviving was very slim. Again, in those days, no law required an air shaft separate from the coal hoisting pit, nor were there any escape routes other than the one hole (the case of Parrall 1906).

Since the cage guides had been wrecked and the cage itself was on the bottom twisted and broken, it was impossible for rescue men to go down until something was improvised. A bucket used for mucking a shaft while sinking it, was brought around and rigged to the hoisting drum. This bucket was

1. *West Virginia Heritage,* Vol. 2.

large enough to hold about three men, but went up and down in a twisting, swinging motion without guides. Safety lamps were sent for from some distance away and were back in an hour. (It seems strange today that a mine would not have many such lamps on hand.)

John Laxton, superintendent, and two other men went down first, but Mr. Laxton was injured within twenty feet of the bottom by a piece of falling ice.

On the second attempt, three men reached the bottom but were driven back when the safety lamp showed too much methane gas to risk further probing. On the next try (night had fallen) the men found the entries so torn up that they could not penetrate until debris was moved. The first move was to restore the trapdoors and air stoppings so that fresh air could be forced into passageways and headings to dissipate the gas, both blackdamp and methane. These men worked through the night while the crowds remained outside in the cold dreary January air. The fires from the coke ovens threw an eerie, ghostly light through the smoke from the windblown flames.

Friday dawned with the crowd growing with curiosity seekers coming in by passenger trains. Everytime the hoist brought up the bucket, the crowd surged forward to see if there was a survivor or a blackened corpse. Night came again with no one retrieved, dead or alive, and the crowd remained. During the night, word came that three bodies would be brought up on Saturday morning.

Early, the crowd grew larger with people arriving by train from Grafton, Fairmont, Terra Alta, Piedmont, and other points. The town became so crowded that there were no places to eat or sleep. The weather cleared turning bitter cold. At 9:25, the first body, identified as Isaiah Timmons, the pit and fire boss, was brought up and placed in a rough box, taken to the engine room, and viewed by the coroner's jury. Curious sightseers were not allowed to look. He was

then placed in a wagon and taken uptown to the undertaker. As the body passed his house, his widow was telling friends she could not believe that her husband and son had died.

The next body brought up on that Saturday was Daniel Miller, first body located but not brought to the outside. The third was Willie Timmons, a mere boy and son of Isaiah Timmons, the first corpse that was brought up. His mother held her faith to the last, vowing that her husband and son would survive.

On Sunday at 2:30, nine bodies were brought up. Work of exploring and establishing good air courses continued and finally the clean-up crew and retrievers reached the first heading. On Monday morning, six more bodies were brought out. The crews began to work in two-hour shifts and all crews worked around the clock. State Mine Inspector Tucker was on hand.

Due to the length of time the bodies had been dead, the odor in the mine became obnoxious. It was necessary to do more brattice work to offset the odors as well as the gas hazards. On Wednesday, five more were brought out, not badly burned but decomposed. Even the people in the town could smell the odor of long-dead corpses and the funerals were being carried on as quickly as possible. The last two victims were brought up at 4:30 P.M. Wednesday. The last body found was that of a fifteen-year-old boy, J. Bird Miller, and son of Daniel Miller the first body found.

In the list of victims, note that none of them were foreigners from the mainland of Europe. Some were native of England. What a contrast to those who died in explosions after 1900, with sometimes over 80 percent being European born. Nearly all the Newburg victims were from around here, and native stock. All names sound American or English.

THE LIST OF THE DEAD OF THE NEWBURG DISASTER

Clinton Albright*—married 24th of December
Nicholas Birtley—fifteen-year-old son of Richard
Richard Birtley—had a wife and three other small children, was stepfather of the three Guy victims
John Byer, Jr.—stepson-in-law of Richard Birtley
John Carroll—a wife only
Michael Clark—single
John Conoway, Jr.—single
John Edwards—single
E. Fortney—single, brother to Mrs. Arthur Ogden
Morgan Freeman—wife and one child
Harry Guy—wife and one child in England, stepson of Richard Birtley
Joseph Guy—wife only; stepson of Richard Birtley
Thomas Guy—single, stepson of Richard Birtley
Peter Hanley—single
John Hornby—single
Joseph Johnson—wife only
Joseph Ross Kelly—wife and three children
Michael J. Kenny—single
Henry Lambert—wife and one child
John Lambert—wife and one child
Frank Laymire and
William Laymire—twins, both single; went to work on Monday and were killed Thursday
James McGowan—single
Albert McWilliams—wife and four children
Daniel Miller—wife and four children
J. B. Miller—son of Daniel
Frank Moon—single; brother to Mrs. Newton Moore
Newton Moore—wife only
Arthur Ogden—wife and two children
George Riggins—wife and four children
William Sansbury—wife and four children

Andrew Scott—single
Wilbur C. Spencer—single
Isaiah Timmons—wife and four children
William Timmons—age fourteen, son of Isaiah
Charles Tunley—wife and one child
Jacob H. Weaver—wife and five children
John Alvis Weaver—single
Adolph Wein*—married twenty-three days, December 24, and died January 21

Author's note: Three fathers along with young sons were killed. In this group one set were twins and one set, the Guy brothers, were three.

Six members of the Birtley family died, father and son with three stepsons and one stepson-in-law.

*Note: The man listed first alphabetically and the one listed last alphabetically were married together on the same date, Christmas Eve, lived under the same roof, and died together, twenty-three days later.

Six of the victims were named John.

At the time of this disaster, Grover Cleveland was president-elect, but not yet in office.

Emanuel Willis Wilson was governor of West Virginia but had not taken office.

From the Newburg tragedy to the Itmann blast 1972—a period of eighty-four years—the West Virginia Department of Mines has listed ninety-eight major and minor gas and dust explosions. A coroner's jury has sat for every one and given a verdict, but none was so well stated as the one given January 30, 1886.

THE VERDICT

"The Coroner's Jury Decides that the Newburg Horror was the result of the neglect of orders and disobeyance of the law—The Jury Takes the Law To Task and Deconts at Length Upon much needed Legislation."

Postscript:

Not a soul is alive who remembers the Newburg mine disaster. Some know that their ancestors died in the blast. However, the town of Newburg keeps its history well. The people are aware that once upon a time long ago thirty-nine men and boys died horribly underground. A cemetery on the hill holds the remains of nearly all of them.

The town no longer has a mine. The spot where the shaft was sunk is now a barren space, the hole filled to ground level. The old crumbling coke ovens can be found close by in a jungle of undergrowth and big trees.

Once Newburg was an exciting town with its crack B&O passenger trains with sleek pullmans pulled by high-wheeler coal burning beauties en route from Baltimore to Cincinnati and points west. All stopped at Newburg.

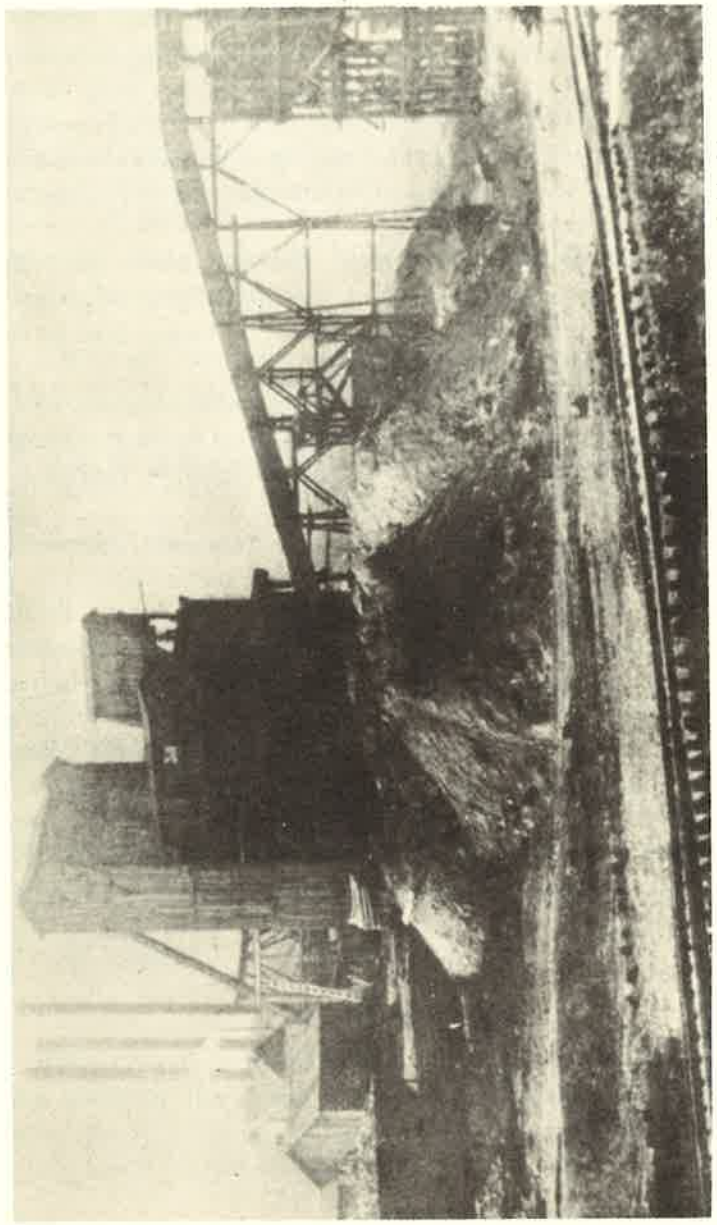
There were gristmills, good hardware stores, and numerous businesses. A bank stood on the corner and nearby was a drugstore. Today the railroad station is no more. Some freight is handled and strip coal is billed out at the one-man office. The bank is gone; the gristmill is no longer needed. But many people live in Newburg. Nice houses have been built and paved streets accommodate the residents. Many buildings have fallen into disuse, but a good high school stands high on the hill supervising the valley. The cemetery where many of the victims lie is visible from the school windows. But Newburg does not let her history die.

IN MEMORIAM

NEWBURG
By C. F. Sullivan

I

'Tis done! The fatal gas,
That unseen deadly foe,



Newburg shaft and complex where West Virginia's first big mine explosion occurred. Nothing remains of this plant today. (Courtesy of Charles A. Frazier, Newburg, West Virginia.)

That crushes men and coal alike,
In regions down below,
Has left a town in mourning,
And o'er it cast a gloom,
For hardy men and merry boys
Who met their awful doom.

II

'Tis done! The fatal gas,
Of Newburg's deepest mine,
Has launched into eternity
Her miners, thirty-nine.
Poor fellows, never thinking,
As they gaily worked away,
That the specter death was waiting
And watching for his prey.

III

'Tis done! The fatal gas,
What havoc it has wrought!
What deep distress and misery
To many homes it brought!
Oh, hear the sobs of mother;
The grief of that young wife;
The plaintive cry of children,
For him who lost his life.

IV

'Tis done! The fatal gas,
Has left its deadly work.
This fire storm came upon
Those toilers in the dark.
No storm could be its equal
For destruction in the mine,

As it raged in all its fury
Among those thirty-nine.

V

'Tis done! The fatal gas,
Has struck its deadly blow,
And made the shaft a living tomb
For those who worked below.
Without a note of warning—,
A thud, an awful roar,
And thirty-nine poor miners
Hard work will know no more.

VI

'Tis done! The fatal gas,
That in the shaft did lurk,
Gave vent unto its fury,
And did its deadly work.
Fair Newburg's hills re-echoed
The fearful deadly sound,
That wrought such dire destruction
To those beneath the ground.

VII

'Tis done! The fatal gas,
The pen cannot portray;
We only can imagine
The monster's fearful sway.
The crush of coal and timber,
The dying moan and call,
The fire, and smoke and thunder,
Would hearts of iron appall.

VIII

'Tis done! The fatal gas,
The fiend of every mine,
Has crushed the life and hope
Of that gallant thirty-nine.
Oh, what a sense of sorrow
On every face was spread
When the truth became apparent
That thirty-nine were dead.

IX

Thy will be done, Great Father,
Thy ways are dark indeed;
We pray for those dear orphans,
Who now so sorely need;
We pray for wives made lonely
By this sad stroke of Thine,
And may we long remember
Fair Newburg's fatal mine.

Chapter 2

Saved by a Cow

Red Ash

March 6, 1900

On a cold March morning in 1900 a miner rose early and prepared to go to the mine for his day's shift. First, he had to see if his milk cow was in her stall so his wife could do the milking. That morning a drizzling rain was falling with gusts of wind that forbode snow, and it was very dark outside. The cow had gotten that sudden urge, since spring was in the air, to go in search of a masculine friend, and was not in her place. The miner was compelled to go in search of the bovine, since his wife was expecting and could not be out, especially before daylight.

He was a coal loader who usually worked with a "buddy." They were expected to be at the working place at seven o'clock, but loaders were paid by the ton and could be late and not be "docked." The miner called his buddy who lived nearby to say that his milk cow had to be brought in before he could leave for the mine. The buddy said that he would wait so they could go inside together. The strayed bovine was soon found and given a good beating with a willow limb and put into the milking stall. The miner seized his bucket, yelled for his friend, and both started the climb up the hill to the drift mouth.

About 200 feet from the mine entrance, they felt the earth jar and heard the rumble. The Red Ash Mine had blown up.

The cow, smarting from the willow limb marks on her back, had saved the lives of these two men.

Fourteen years had gone by since the mining industry in West Virginia had suffered a major mine catastrophe. Coal production was climbing, demand for fuel increased daily, and the operators were striving for more tons per man. The new century was only three months and six days old when Red Ash went up killing forty-six men. The state was not accustomed to such tragedies. People were shocked and saddened and thought it unbelievable that so many men could die so quickly. The coal operators as well as the state department of mines were surprised that such a thing could happen.

In the scenic and rugged New River canyon two miles below Thurmond, the Red Ash Mine opened in 1892 on the south side facing the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad across the river. The C&O had built a branch line downriver two miles in order to haul the coal to the main line. No passenger service was inaugurated, thereby leaving the coal town somewhat isolated.

In the eight years of operation, headings were driven deeper into the mountain, entries led off in all directions, thereby making more open spaces inside the mine. Methane gas began to be detected in larger amounts by the Davy safety lamp, used by the fire bosses and state mine inspectors, who periodically inspected the workings. Despite the state men's inspection, critics scoffed at their visits and reports as being company dictated. However, the mine had had only two fatal accidents since its opening.

Miners began to grumble about the mine being dangerous in 1900. They began to have fear since constant reports were being made of gas being found in the headings, and many of them quit and went elsewhere to seek mining jobs. Several had quit only a few days before the explosion of March 6.

On this March morning when the Red Ash Mine let loose her terrific force of ignited methane gas and coal dust at 7:45

on a dreary Tuesday, a scene of tragedy was acted out that became the pattern of all future explosions, with very little variation and no rehearsals; thus the terrible realization of what had happened, then the frantic efforts to see what could be done in the quickest possible time to effect a rescue, if anyone remained alive inside the mine. Then came the rush toward the scene, of wives, fathers, mothers, and other relatives wailing and shouting, hoping for a miracle. Such scenes are beyond description and all seem to have the same tone, but the individual differences in humans make each scene a variable sight. Such catastrophes are heartbreaking even to the onlooker who has no kin or connection to those unfortunate ones.

Men who volunteer to enter a blast-torn mine are a breed of men who stand alone; men who dare to go where an explosive element may regenerate and blow again or to enter where the deadly afterdamp or CO gas or other gas combinations may destroy them. They hope that men alive may be huddled inside a barricaded room awaiting rescue, not death. Miners never hedge, but prepare, and then go inside if heat and smoke does not drive them back.

The first task was getting fresh air into the Red Ash Mine to dispel all dangerous gases. To do this, brattices had to be restored since all airways had been damaged by the blast. Brattice cloth was strung so that air could be forced into the explosion areas and thence make a complete return to the outside. The Red Ash fan had been damaged and was useless, but the Rush Run, a sister mine, with openings into Red Ash, had a big fan in operation which was able to force all the needed air into the explosion torn area as soon as workmen could install brattices.

After three days, rescue men were able to penetrate into the workings and recover all the bodies. The company officials stated at first that only thirty-seven men had entered the mine, but at the final count, forty-six bodies had been found

and brought to a shop building set up as a morgue. Two of the victims were boys just turned twelve years of age. (There were no child labor laws at the time.)

The coal company had coffins sent up river from Charleston to Thurmond, then a busy terminal, where they were unloaded from a baggage car of a passenger train to the horror of many onlookers. By being transferred to a boxcar, these coffins went down to Red Ash, where they were unloaded and hoisted up the mountain to the improvised morgue.

As rescue men carried the bodies outside, they were identified, prepared for burial, and placed in the rectangular unlined wooden boxes. In some cases the body was not washed nor were any clean clothes placed on it but it was doused with a disinfectant or astringent to suppress the odor. The body, when coffined, was lowered to the bottom of the incline, placed on a cart, hauled by a mule down a spur railroad track a half a mile to the coal camp, then carried to the victim's home where religious services would be held.

A somber stillness would settle over the mining town as the mule and driver brought the cart down with its ghastly load. The quietness would break by the audible grief of a wife or mother, or others of close kin. At one instance, a father wept and moaned over the young bodies of his two motherless sons as the death cart brought them home.

In the event of an explosion or any catastrophe, the question arises: How or why did it happen? It was not an act of God that set off the Red Ash disaster or ever is it in mine blasts, but carelessness and error on the part of humans. This human mistake brought to the scene the state's governor—Atkinson and State Chief Mine Inspector Paul, the latter to conduct an investigation. Chief Paul would not issue any statement until the mine was fully explored and all bodies removed. In the meantime, other people expounded many reasons, some erroneous and some logical. These purveyors of

thought gave as the cause, lack of precaution, blunders, and plain stupidity. Others said that a lack of strict enforcement of state mine laws and the absence of better mining laws led to the human slaughter.

The coroner's jury met and came to a verdict that seemed fair and faultless in its conclusions. The jury, by shifting evidence, found that the fire boss, Black Long, was late in arriving to inspect the mine before the men entered. Workers were at their places before Mr. Long had completed his runs. Evidence showed that he had detected considerable gas, but was too late to mark off the places before the men started working. Men used open lights and supposedly one such light set off the explosion in eight-left entry. Long's body was found in this number eight heading.

What caused such prevalency of gas? George Bryant, a machineman who left the mine at midnight Monday, testified that he opened a trapdoor and kicked it toward closing, but something obstructed it. He did not try to see if it would or did close securely. This laxity on his part caused an air short circuit allowing gas to accumulate in the headings.

Another statement came out that the company was careless about the fan's operation. Some miners stated (not before the jury, but to reporters) that the fan had been idle since Thursday preceding the explosion on Tuesday. One reliable citizen told newsmen that the fan ran only a short time Monday. The cause simmered down to three things: 1. A half closed trapdoor. 2. A failure to run the fan. 3. A late inspection by the fire boss.

At the time of the Red Ash disaster, there was only charity to assist families left destitute by the loss of the family provider. Many were the cases of destitution in this little mining town in the New River gorge. A fund-raising program was organized. Many years passed and many miners' families suffered before a system of compensation and social security was set up.

Present-day mining laws will permit no man to enter a working place until the fire boss has marked it as "dangerous" or "OK to enter."

VICTIMS—MARCH 6, 1900

Agee, Beverly
Arnold, Fred
Ball, Robert
Chapplie, Simon
Clair, John
Collins, Robert
Daniels, Moses
Day, John
Day, William
Dennis, Walter
Dewes, Norvella
Datson, L. E.
Downey, Carl and
Downey, Charles (Twin brothers, 12½ years old)
Fitch, Simeon
Foute, C. A.
Franklin, Smith
Hackney, James
Hammick, Edward (12 years old)
Hammick, William
Hart, Arthur
Harvey, Ed. (12 years old)
Holmes, Granville
Jackson, Sam
Johnson, Thomas L.
Long, B. B.
Long, Ernest
Long, Joe
Long, Thomas
Massie, William
Morris, Isaac
Noel, Hollister
Perfader, Charles
Pritt, A. J.
Quarles, William
Ramsey, W. C.
Sanner, J. A.
Shuff, Sam
Sleds, William
Stewart, C. A.
Stone, John
Thaxton, Luther
Tucker, Berry
Ward, John L.
Ward, William
Washington, James

Chapter 3

Algoma

September 15, 1902

At the start of the new century, the Tug River Valley coalfields began to open rapidly. Millions were invested by outside interests and millions were made easily. McDowell County, one of the most southern and rugged in the state of West Virginia, possessed enormous boundaries of coal in different seams, the Pocahontas No. 3 being one of the best. The Norfolk and Western Railroad had been completed from Cincinnati to the Atlantic seaboard giving southern West Virginia an outlet to foreign markets. As a result, the South Fork and the Elkhorn, or North Fork of Tug River, boomed. Jobs were for the asking, especially for those who would go underground to dig out the coal.

Since the blacks in the South had gained their freedom, forty years before, they were poorly paid farmhands and sharecroppers. The second and third generation offspring of the blacks were sought after by coal operators to work the mines. They were far better paid than a farmhand but still not enough for any standard of living. They left the cotton fields for the coalfields. Another large segment of labor was the immigrant from southern Europe. As a result the mining companies hired scores of inexperienced and poorly educated men to work the nation's most hazardous occupation. Unlike mining rules of today, which require tutoring before a man enters the mine, the men of those days were instructed only what tools to have and where to use them. Only the bosses had the experience.

Algoma, a mine named for an Indian tribe, was situated near the mouth of Crumpler Branch, a tributary of the North Fork of the Tug and about one mile from the town of Northfork, and two miles above Keystone. The mine was a drift mouth, that is, an opening directly into the horizontal strata.

The mine at one point ran under Buzzards Creek where the coal seam was too close to the creek bed above, and at times of high water, might break into the mines. The company had a dip cut under the stream bed deep enough to have sufficient rock strata above to be safe. The main haul way went through this dip to the workings beyond Buzzards Creek.

On Monday morning, September 15, 1902, bank boss or mine foreman, Jim Lusker (mines were called "banks" in early days of mining) led his men past the dip and into the workings about one and a fourth miles from the mine entrance. Men divided into groups going into rooms and working places while foreman Lusker went toward the main heading. All miners carried on their caps open lights fed by whale oil or lard oil.

Over the weekend, methane gas accumulated in the headings and in the main entry beyond the dip. Somewhere beyond the men toward the heading, the bank boss supposedly ignited the gas with his open light. Seventeen men and four mules died in these workings on the other side of the Buzzard Creek dip. There was no indication of a forced air system to dispel the methane, and this gas is lighter than air. There was no chance for the gas to escape. Late that night, the bodies had all been recovered. Some of the men had burned to death by all indications and some had died of suffocation or blackdamp.

Death by blackdamp or afterdamp is regarded as not being as painful as one imagines. When men die in the aftermath of an explosion, they usually do so by CO gas-carbon monoxide which is instantaneous; or by carbon dioxide without oxygen which is quick suffocation. The other asphyxiation is CO gas

mixed with nitrous oxide (laughing gas) that intoxicates the victim, and puts him into a stupor. He dies easily, sometimes smiling or in a reclining or sitting position. Men have been found dead while eating with food in hand near the mouth. Boys were found dead after the Stuart explosion as if they were playing a game of some kind.

None of the victims lived in or around Algoma. All were newcomers from Virginia and North Carolina. Two only were white, one being the foreman and the other a Hungarian. A mortuary in Northfork prepared them quickly for burial and sixteen somber coffins were stacked on the station platform at Northfork and later loaded on the No. 4 Northfork and Western passenger train baggage coach taking them to their final destination. John Roxie, the Hungarian, was shipped on another train to Pocahontas, Virginia, where he was interred.

McDowell County, coal metropolis of America, had pulled the curtain for act one, her first major mine explosion.

VICTIMS

Childers, Martin
Clark, Henry
Cryder, Alex
Cryder, Clayton
Gravely, Dan
Jones, Bill
Jones, Clem
Lusker, Jim
Mullens, Charles
Roxie, John
Sanders, Bowden
Stovall, Enos
Wade, Jess
Waldron, Tom
Waldron, Sam
Warren, Harry
Woodie, Henry

Chapter 4

Rush Run

March 19, 1905

The old-timers nicknamed Rush Run-Red Ash the "once more" mine because in 1905 she blew up one night and before daylight, she blew again. Back in 1900, she had blown up almost five years before to the day, both in March, that windy, raucous and ribaldrous month that exploded the most coal mines in past years.

The reader might concur that all mine explosions are alike. He might say that all women are alike, all men are the same. Basically, yes, individually, no, and so with coal mine explosions. Individually they differ, and so with Rush Run-Red Ash.

This catastrophe that snuffed out the lives of twenty-four men did something that has not occurred in the seventy years since, and is hoped will never again in West Virginia mines. Thus, that the rescue force that hoped to save those inside was killed in the "once more blast." Secondly, it was the first one in which fire shot out at night and was so plainly seen. However, alike others, it took, unmercifully, the lives of good God-fearing men, attempting to feed their families and themselves by the "sweat of their brows." Those men who dug the coal, went inside with the faith that everything was safe. At Rush Run, it was the night shift back in 1905 and the crew was small; just eleven men went into Rush Run and five went into Red Ash, the sister mine. The two mines were linked together, belonging to the same company and worked like Siamese twin sisters. What one did the other knew.

On this fateful Saturday night of March 19, with spring in the air and the night clear, a tinge of romance was evident. There was a sort of gathering at the superintendent's house, for in those days the mine officials were the social elite. An auditor from another mine brought his girl friend along. Before the party started, the superintendent and others had gathered at the mine office for some last minute check-ups.

The auditor stepped outside for a breath of air and something made him look toward the mountainside at the mine opening. Maybe a rumble, and then he witnessed a sight unusual to mankind. He saw and heard a mine explosion at night. The time was 9:25 P.M.

On Saturday evening a crew of men was sent into the Rush Run side of the mine to prepare workings for the Monday morning shift. There had been a heavy slate fall which left a large overhead cavity in No. 11 heading. Andrew Weir had been sent there alone to break up the slate with dynamite in order that workmen could load it into cars to bring to the outside. Methane gas, which is lighter than air, had collected in the big overhead space left by the fall. It is presumed that when Weir put off the large dynamite shot, the gas in this pocket ignited, in turn stirring up the dust, and the two awful forces exploded almost instantaneously, its power gaining impetus as it went down the corridors and workings till it blew to the outside. As the fire went with bullet-like speed down the entries, it pushed into the Red Ash side which took a few seconds longer to reach the mouth of the mine. In fact, the one explosion blew two mines. Eight men were in the Rush Run side and five men were in the Red Ash part. It is possible they never knew when death took them.

The above theory, which seemed the most sensible as to the cause of the explosion, was advanced by a well-known miner highly respected for his intelligence and sound judgment. Other miners who discussed the disaster were of two opinions: that an open light (no other kind was used then)

set off a gas pocket that picked up speed as it went. Others figured that swirling dust which was very prevalent in the mines, just ignited by one of the miners' lamps.

Not long before this tragedy, the management had installed some new type punch machines which had increased the dust in the mine.

Back at the office on the mountainside, the visiting auditor went along with superintendent Laing and some other officials who were discussing some matters pertaining to the mine. Their wives were down at Mr. Laing's house where a Saturday night social was being held. The auditor later told his girl friend, Sheila, "I hope never to see such a thing again. When I saw that awful sheet of fire belch forth from the mountain, I thought the world was coming to an end. The fire shot from the opening nearly across the river to the cliffs on the other side of the valley. It seemed as if a volcano had opened up and was about to envelope us with flame. The roar was like that of a continuous roll of thunder.

"Then from the Red Ash opening came another blast with a spurt of flame and noise like heavy cannonading. I realized then what had happened and I rushed into the office where Mr. Laing was and told him that the mine had blown up. Everyone inside the office stood speechless, horrified, and panic stricken."

Mr. Laing went about getting rescue workers and mining men together to see if a rescue was possible. The auditor went down to Mr. Laing's house to tell the officials' wives what had happened and to get some sleep.

In the meantime, Thomas Bannister, the mine foreman, got together a crew of ten men, two of them the Hutchinson brothers and one of Hutchinson's sons to try a rescue. All hindsighters said that it was a foolish move since no brattice cloth had been strung to protect them or clear out any blackdamp or new accumulation of methane gas. One fan was still running in the Rush Run side, undamaged. (Fans are of little

use if the air is not controlled and funneled to the proper places.)

At 3:50 A.M. Sunday, Thomas Bannister along with his brave crew of ten perished in a quick heavy blast of methane gas. And Rush Run-Red Ash had blown once more.

On the outside, the concussion was not heavy like the one earlier in the night. There was no gas left after the first blast, but just enough gas had regenerated to go off from the open lights.

Mr. Laing immediately had the Rush Run drift mouth sealed and prepared methodically to take in the recovery men by the Red Ash opening. The fan on that side had been restored and brattice cloth was hung and clean-up crews started to work. Then men entered the mine Monday morning prepared to bring out the dead.

In the second explosion, Mr. Auditor was jarred out of his bed at Mr. Laing's house by the blast. The women began screaming, wailing, and fainting, fearing that their men were in the mine attempting rescue. Mr. Auditor stated, "I never want to witness such a scene again with women." He was the only man in the house at the time.

The two mines were owned and operated by the New River Smokeless Coal Company, Richmond, Virginia, a consolidation which owned several other mines in West Virginia, one being Lanark near Beckley. The mines had been inspected regularly by a state mine inspector who declared the mine safe.

The flash of fire and the roar of the explosion was seen and heard for a radius of twenty miles. People in Fayetteville, the county seat and closest town, saw the flash plainly, felt the earth tremble, and heard the deafening roar of the blast. Even people on Loop Creek, to the west, felt and heard it. Oak Hill and Mount Hope heard and felt the blast also. On the mountain and plateau above New River Canyon windowpanes were broken from such a heavy jar.

Only one victim, Henderson Mosley, carried any insurance. Just a few weeks before, he had taken out a thousand-dollar policy and had paid only one premium. The other relatives of the dead were more unfortunate and a call for help had to be sent out. The New River Banking and Trust Company of Oak Hill sponsored a fund for the widows and orphans.

The eleven rescue men were found and brought out. Finally all the bodies were recovered and interred.

LIST OF VICTIMS

Allen, Clarence
Allen, Thomas
Bannister, Thomas
Gwinn, Charles
Gwinn, James
Henson, E. W.
Hopkins, G. W.
Hutchinson, D. C.
Hutchinson, J. P.
Hutchinson, Norman
Jackson, Clarence
Jarrell, Brooks
Jarrett, Hollie
Jones, Charles
Kioski, Joseph
Kioski, Martin
Koon, William
Kruger, Charles
Moseley, Claybon
Moseley, Henderson
Noyt, Steve
Phillips, J. E.
Weir, Andrew
Wood, Percy

Chapter 5

Coaldale

January 4, 1906

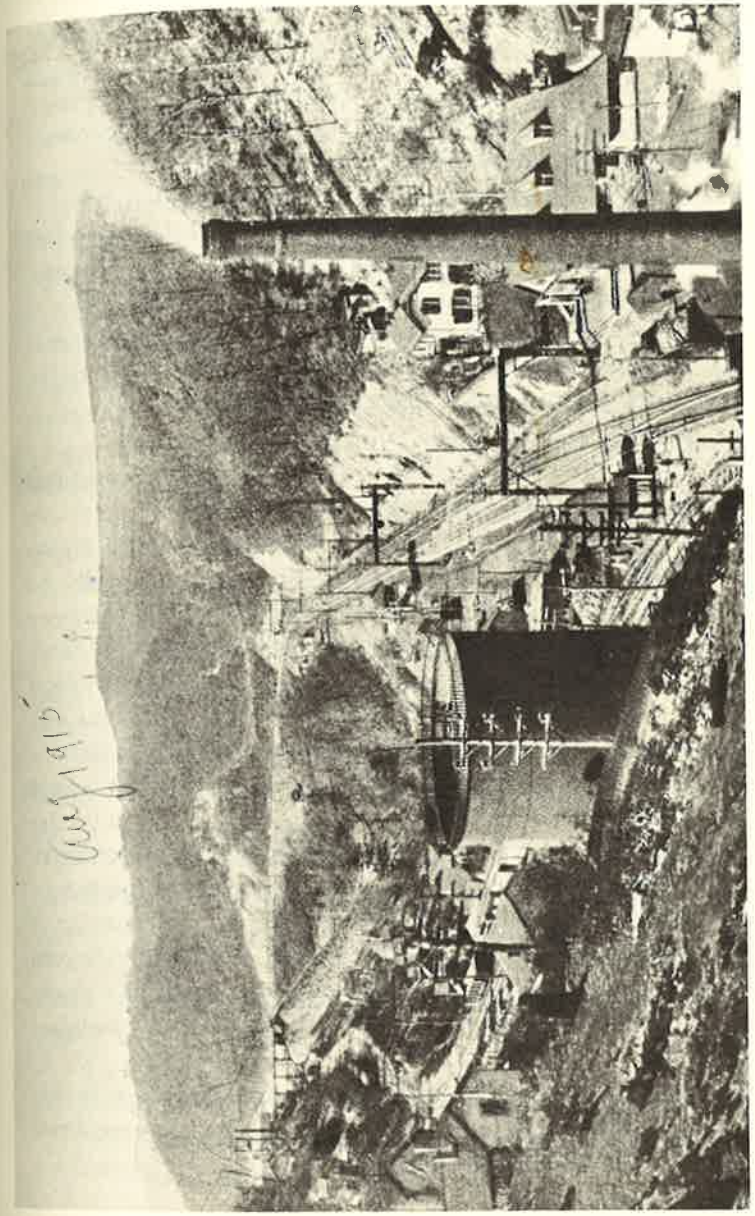
On a cold New Year's Day in 1906, I got off the train at a small coal camp called Coaldale. It was before noon and I was halfheartedly job hunting. I knew if nothing suited me, I could catch another train back to Bluefield or down to Welch. I had enough money to last for a while enabling me to look around for a suitable job.

I had heard that the coal companies in the Pocahontas and Flat Top fields were hiring men for inside work. Digging coal was one occupation I had no experience with but felt that during winter months working underground would be warmer than topside.

The station agent let me stash my imitation leather suitcase in the storage room while I went scouting around. The area was somewhat like other parts of West Virginia which I had seen, especially where coal mines existed. The air on this plateau was sharper than usual since the elevation was higher than I was accustomed to.

It was near noon when I inquired where I could get something to eat. I was told I could buy something at the company store or Ellen's independent store below the town or I might get a regular meal at the clubhouse, a boardinghouse for miners. I chose the walk down to Ellen's store, which was a "Jenny Lind" building on a dirt road with a porch for loading and unloading. A dwelling house sat behind the store against the hillside.

On entering I caught the typical smell of a country store,



Coaldale as it looked at the time of the explosion. Railroad station and company store are located in the lower right. Mine was at the upper left. (Courtesy of A. B. Perdue, Princeton, West Virginia.)

which had a good flavor, such as bacon, pickles, onions, kerosene, feed, and so forth all mixed into a special aroma. A kindly looking old man sat near the large burnside stove and looked at me rather appraisingly since I wore a suit, overcoat, hat, and gloves. He figured me to be a drummer.

Then a pretty voice belonging to a pretty woman asked if she could help me. She did not smile, she did not frown, but was the most complete "poker face" I ever saw on a woman, especially a young pretty one. There was no disdain nor a dissatisfaction of tone as is found in some clerks who do not want to be bothered. She just looked straight at me, strictly business, but not overdone. She meant exactly what she said, "What can I sell you?"

I purchased a can of sardines, a small box of crackers, and a bottle of soda pop which she got from the back room where it was cold. I paid her twenty cents and she told me to eat on the counter top if I wished. I ate there, especially to see more of her since she intrigued me highly from the very first glance. No conversation ensued, and another customer came in, spoke to the old man, and was waited on by the girl who treated the customer in the same manner as she had me.

I had graduated from Marshall College in Huntington a year earlier; I had tried teaching school, which paid little and the term was only six months long, so I quit at the end of the school year and began trying to find an occupation more remunerative. Since my father was a carpenter and had taught me some fundamentals of the trade, I tried that until the job ran out, as carpenter jobs are apt to do. Winter was on, a bad time for building anyway, so I took my little amount of money and moved on after the Christmas holiday was over.

The manner of this girl made me want to talk just to see her reaction. I brought up various subjects, but she answered matter of factly and said no more.

I asked about work at the mines. The old man said, "Yes, they're hiring coal loaders."

"Is this a good safe mine in which to work?"

"One of the best," he said. "High coal, no gas and dry inside. I worked here until I retired. What can you do?"

I stated that I had taught school. "Ah, we have a good school here. See the mine superintendent."

"I thought the district board hired teachers."

"Oh, yes, but super tells them who to hire."

Then I said I had been carpentering this winter, not teaching, was looking for some other kind of work. Then the beautiful poker face spoke up in a very businesslike way, no smile, "Would you do a small carpenter job, say about two days."

"That depends who wants a job done and what sort of job."

"For me, putting a new ceiling in the store."

She had ordered, from Bluefield, a thousand feet of a new type ceiling, you know, the pine fir type about three inches wide, one-fourth inch thick, with grooves on the face and tongue and grooved edges that no cracks showed.

I hesitated, slowly finished my lemon soda pop, to give me time to think. I wanted to see and talk more to this girl. Break the ice, so to speak.

"Where could I board?"

"We have a room in the back where the delivery boy sleeps to watch the store at night and keep the fire when the stock is in danger of freezing. He likes to stay at home at nights when he can. Papa stays when he doesn't. You can eat at our house since we have a colored woman to clean and cook for us. Mother's dead."

"Just two or three days. And tools, I have none with me."

"The store has enough tools I think. It will brighten this drab place and give more light."

The place had only oil lamps, a big brass one suspended from a crude plank ceiling. I agreed to do the job.

Inwardly, I was delighted. My heart beat faster, and wildly my mind ran. Then I thought about all the girls I had known in college, before and afterwards. Oh, but this one hit me. No smile, no conversation. I've seen many pretty women, as pretty as she, but she's a new type.

The old man showed me the room; she brought clean sheets; and I went back to the depot to get my bags. She sent the dray boy and delivery wagon with me so I would not have to carry the load. Just a pretty, thoughtful, smart girl. No smile, not unhappy, just peculiar.

The next morning, January 2, I started work on the ceiling, after finding all necessary tools, nails, etc. She gave me a few orders, cautioned me not to damage any stock, and when the delivery boy was not busy he could hold up lumber while I placed and nailed. At noon we ate at the house while Papa and dray boy watched the store. Mattie was an excellent cook and was overanxious to please me. "I can see de gennemun in dat man."

Ellen's expression never changed. No smile, no comments; saying only what was necessary.

The next day, work progressed fine and I told Ellen that I could finish easily in the afternoon, even placing the molding and rehanging the big brass lamp. She nodded in a grateful and pleased manner, yet no smile, no conversation. While I was on the scaffold overhead nailing, I thought I caught a glimpse of her appraising me. Maybe she'd leave the "gate open" for me after all.

That afternoon, I finished and she figured up my thirty-five cents an hour wages and prepared to pay me. I very nearly refused to accept it. I looked deep into her eyes, she never wavered, nor batted an eyelash, but I felt she could read the inscription across my soul. The cerulean blue in her

eyes was the epitome of a hundred centuries of a thousand generations of Magyar beauties.

"Ellen, since you are so beautiful," I stammered, "why have you not married?"

She showed no offense at my pertness but calmly said, "I never intend to marry."

I was hurt, disappointed. "And you don't like men?"

"I did not say that. I merely said, I don't want to marry." No smile, no resentment, no reaction to my compliment.

I stayed that night, had breakfast with them the next morning, feeling that this would about end this new experience.

I tried a little more conversation with Ellen but met with the same lack of interest. Papa talked a lot, in his foreign dialect, and kept saying how he regretted to see me leave. So I told them I would go to the mine office to apply for a job. If I got one, I would go to the clubhouse or some boarding-house and get lodging. If I did not get work, I would return, get my bag and board the afternoon train.

The superintendent sent me to the office to sign up, gave me a slip of paper so that I could buy on credit, if necessary, at the company store my tools, and another slip to get my powder, caps, and fuses. He instructed me to see the mine foreman at quitting time for work assignment. I returned to Ellen's store, told them my intentions in an exuberant manner for I knew I would be seeing Ellen, regardless. I felt something had happened to me. As I got my bag from the bag room, I called Ellen to one side, looked very intently at her—knew then I had fallen in love.

I said, "Ellen, I must see you from time to time. I don't think I could have left Coaldale after meeting you." I was about to blubber incoherently, when I noticed a Mona Lisa smile come to her beautiful face. The icicle blue in her eyes twinkled—and then—the earth tremored—a deep rumble and a

report as if fusillade of artillery from one of our newly built battleships had let go at the Spanish in our late war.

Ellen's expression changed then, and she grabbed my arms and yelled, "My God, the mine has blown up! My brother, Alex, is working in it. I must go."

Realizing the levity of this, I asked her to stay with the distraught Papa while I could go to see what happened. I would return as soon as possible. I put my arms around her tightly for an instant, and for the first time I had touched her. Then I left on my mission like a hero.

The dray boy and I grabbed the horse and delivery wagon and away we went in a hurry. People were gathering fast and I could see smoke coming from the drift. The snow had turned black all around the hills. There seemed to be a terrible jumble of debris, broken timbers, mine cars, and soot over a wide area. I got close as I could to the excitement to see if I could find any news of Ellen's brother. People were running everywhere, some giving orders, others asking questions. Women were screaming and some children hanging to their mothers crying, but wondering what it was all about.

The news began to come to outside the mine, since a barricade had been thrown up to keep the crowds back.

The mine foreman and another man had been near the explosion area when it went off, but not close enough to be overcome. Williams, the mine foreman, had crawled to an inside phone and called to the outside for help. Almost at once, a rescue party entered the mine. Braver men than those will never be when they put their lives on the line to enter a fiery and gaseous hole to try to save their brothers, black or white. Williams and Fitch came out, Williams reporting that about twenty-one men had been caught in the Big Jim Working at the Room 11 near the "Cracker Neck." It was soon felt that all twenty-one had died instantly. (Later another body was discovered making the toll reach twenty-two.)

I kept getting closer and making inquiries and getting

many conflicting stories. Finally, I found one of the office men to whom I had talked that morning. My concern was for Ellen's brother. The gentleman assisted me to get further information. It was believed that all men except those in the Cracker Neck were safe and could come out at another entrance. Rescue parties had found no blackdamp in that area that might kill those who survived the blast or were not in the immediate area.

I got the dray wagon and drove hurriedly back to the store. Ellen met me on the outside, not regarding the January 4 bitter wind. I smiled a reassuring smile as I went to meet her.

"All reports are that your brother is safe." Ellen came into my arms and I kissed her hair. I knew from that instant on she was mine, my own, my future wife.

"He'll be out soon, as all survivors are leaving by the other entrance." Alex's blonde American wife was alongside Ellen and she hugged me too on hearing the good news. Papa was pitiful until he heard the good news and he wept for those who died.

"Ellen, I am going back, for curiosity's sake, to the mine and then I will come for my belongings."

"You can't take all of your belongings from here now, since I belong to you. Please stay in the room until all is settled." She made me so happy despite all the sadness in Coaldale that day.

The mine blew at half past eleven and at four o'clock the recovery crews brought out the first victim, H. C. Conrad, whose body was terribly mangled and his clothing in shreds. Hours passed and at a late hour no more bodies had been recovered. Fire bosses and rescue men from all over the field had merged on Coaldale and were moving in every effort to get to the bodies. It was figured they would be gotten out by late morning. I went to the storeroom to bed at midnight. Ellen and Papa were still up, celebrating Alex's escape and

the change in affairs in general. Ellen walked to the back door of the storeroom with me and I kissed her for the first time. I couldn't sleep any that night.

Ellen opened the store at 8:30 as usual and business was brisk since the mines were not working and crowds from all over were pouring in on every train. I got up as usual with my mind and heart in seventh heaven. During the night, I lay awake thinking of Ellen and how her body had felt when I put my arms around her and drew her close to me. I knew there was a beautiful figure and form underneath that long dress with those long sleeves. But no lecherous or lustful thoughts invaded my mind about her. I felt that she was too pure and pretty to be that pawn of base masculinity. Inwardly, I knew this a Victorian notion and not in keeping with nature's pattern.

I went back to the mine and its crowds to find that the rescue work was very slow. Millions of tons of rock and slate had fallen into the entries and passages attesting to the terrific force of the blast. Luckily, the big fans had not been damaged and were diligently pushing fresh air inside, but so much dust and smoke had been let loose that men were unable to penetrate all the way into Cracker Neck, near No. 11 stop.

Before the bodies had been recovered, the mine office released the list of the names of those known to be dead inside. They were:

J. W. Larve
W. L. Larve
Jim Sloss
Alias Aladar
Anthony Bruce
Silas White
H. C. Conrad
John Patterson
Gus Harris
W. K. Saron
William Price
William Ward
Walter Gwinn
Sit Craves
Nathan Harrison
W. M. Curry
Silas Harrison
June Kelly

Lee Price
Albert Farnam
Two unlisted

The Coaldale explosion was the first on the West Virginia side in the Elkhorn Mountain coals of the Pocahontas fields. However, a larger and disastrous blast hit the same No. 3 seam at Pocahontas, Virginia, in 1884, March 13, killing 112 men. The tourists today may see the orderly rows of graves on Cemetery Hill attesting in mute evidence to that horrible catastrophe.

The immediate cause of the Coaldale blast was not known and may never be, since participants went to eternity in a lightning quickness. Many of the miners gave the opinion that methane gas ignited and was aided by dust which gave the explosion such a terrific force. Another cause was advanced that a powder blast ignited the stirred up "bug dust." Regardless, the force was terrific, blowing sixteen-inch pillars from the mouth at the opening near Maybeury. This opening was not too far from the Cracker Neck.

The Coaldale operation was the first to work the Elkhorn Mountain where the coal seam runs from ten to twelve feet in thickness. The mine had long been considered one of the best and safest in the Tug River fields. The operation employed a considerable number of men; luckily, not more men were killed because the blowup hit only a small section of the workings. This mine belonged to the Cooper heirs of Bramwell, West Virginia, and Salem, Virginia.

Almost all of the victims were protected by the Bramwell Accident Company, a company especially organized to protect miners. The Coaldale miners were progressive men, most of them owning their own homes.

The following day, January 6, the rescue men had recovered the bodies of all the victims, finding another body unaccounted for at first, and bringing the total to twenty-four dead. The Bluefield *Daily Telegraph* of January 8, 1906,

aptly described the horror by coming out with this headline—"22 Victims Lying In A Row Makes A Gruesome Scene."

Large crowds had gathered from all directions and were on hand when the bodies were taken to one of the large buildings near the mine entrance, laid in a row with their faces covered and their hands and feet crossed. Some of them were badly burned, their hands showing the effect of the intense fire. One body was mangled badly, proving that the worker had been at the point of the greatest concussion. All the bodies had been identified, despite their being blackened from coal dust and burned badly, too. A stack of coffins had been brought in, some being borrowed from other colleries, who always kept a few on hand, since mining had proved to have occasional fatalities.

The sight of coffins, always in somber color, mostly black, adds to the horror of passing from this life to eternity. The placing of the coffins behind the row of corpses created a considerable increase in crying and wailing of the bereaved and many onlookers. Many stood around and discussed the awful occurrences, hoping they could rectify a situation already passed to the inevitable.

A newspaperman from a Cincinnati newspaper set up a camera near the bodies in preparation for a picture. One of the authorities in charge of the bodies forbade him to photograph the victims. The reporter was told that he could take pictures of the devastation outside the mine mouth and the crowds, but not of the corpses. This demand was taken gracefully and he carried his camera toward the drift mouth. A Mr. Hicks, a photographer from Pocahontas, Virginia, was allowed to take pictures of the corpses as they lay and also photographed them as they were being put in their coffins.[1]

Three of the coffins were taken to Pocahontas for burial,

1. In 1906 bodies were hardly ever embalmed in case of such accidents.

five were interred at Maybeury, and the remainder were buried in Coaldale. There had been some difficulty in finding just where some were to be buried. Finally, friends or relatives claimed them.

After the bodies were all removed from the scene, an unusual quiet fell over the small mining town. The throngs dispersed nearly as quickly as they had gathered. Some spectators who arrived late, went to the drift mouth to see the evident destruction. They were apalled to see that large mine props had been blown across a narrow valley, and that the woods had been burned so far from the mine mouth. Piles of mine cars and typical mine equipment were strewed everywhere.

Later observers saw workers bring out the carcasses of seven mules killed in the blast. It was imperative to remove them as quickly as possible to prevent decay and air contamination when the men resumed operation. These poor animals were piled at a convenient distance and burned on piles of crossties.

I left the scene realizing that in the last few days a lesson about life, destiny, and death had been told and seen. I felt older, sad for those stricken people, especially the blacks who made up two-thirds of the victims. These black relatives showed their grief more visibly and expressed their strong beliefs in immortality without fear or embarrassment. They were compelled to take their dead to a separate cemetery.

Back at the store, Ellen was overworked, having sold about all the edibles to the visiting crowds. She was surprised to see how many pork and beans, sardines, canned tomatoes, and canned peaches could be eaten with only a pocketknife and cracker supplement. The place was a mess from cast-offs that people threw away. I went to work helping to clean up the place. The family was happy because the brother's life was spared and Papa and Ellen showed by silent action that a new

and worthy man was about to become a member of their family.

The next day, I went to see the superintendent to find out what my status was since it would be sometime before the mine would reopen. I found him to be very busy, lines in his face from the strain, and I regretted to bother him, but he told me I might go to work right away helping to put things right again. I told him I did not feel that I was experienced enough to risk working inside the mine and the only other work would have to be in the store, office, labor gang, or with the carpenters. He was pleased to hear I could use the hammer and saw and immediately assigned me to the carpenter shop.

A boardinghouse stood between Ellen's and the mine buildings which gave me an opportunity to be closer to her. When I told her my new development, she insisted that I room at the store as a protection to her, but I could take my meals at the boardinghouse. Mattie was disappointed, but I felt I must wait before I became such a permanent member.

Spring came beautifully that year, and early, as if nature wanted to flower the hillsides in memory of those unfortunate souls who died that cold Thursday morning in January. My love for Ellen was intense and I had saved my money diligently in order that we could get married in June. The carpenter shop was among the best paid wages around the operation, thus enabling me to save more money. Papa's health had gotten worse, his breathing being difficult, and his coughing incessant. Many old miners seemed to have this respiratory trouble which medical science at the time had not researched and brought into the open.

One day the super came to me to tell me that he knew I was a college man and showed above average polish and that he had something in mind. He said he was not exactly satisfied with the local five-room school and after inquiring and observing me, he would like to see me the new principal

beginning with the fall term. And he further stated this school district was the best paying one in the area, sometimes the company would ante up a little extra salary for the right man. I asked how I might go about being placed since I did not know the school board or district supervisor. "If I say so, the board says so. That's all there is to it." I thanked him and felt highly flattered.

Papa called me one evening and asked me to fix his business for him since he thought his days were nearing an end. I wrote his will for him containing only two stipulations:

That Alex should have his house and land which included the store building and that Ellen should have his cash on hand. He had a small insurance with the Bramwell insurance and Ellen was already named as beneficiary. She seemed very happy that he had done this to his satisfaction.

In the latter part of May a cold rain set in and during this wet spell Papa went to join his beloved wife. We buried him by her side in the cemetery at Bramwell.

Since Alex had the home, he informed Ellen to remain there until our nuptials were consummated and we were settled. In the meantime, Ellen bargained to sell the stock to Alex and his pretty Nordic wife, a fine woman, and allow him to quit the mines.

When the superintendent at the mine heard that Ellen was to quit the store, he came to me with another offer, one that seemed on the surface a real chance to start climbing the ladder. It was this: That Ellen could have an assistant manager's job at the company store, under the supervision of the superintendent, not the store manager, or she could have a job as scrip clerk in the office at an equal salary. As a bonus all our purchases would be cost plus 10 percent. We could have one of the good houses reserved for the bosses and upper echelon of the company. There was no big hurry, just be ready by time school opened.

In June we were married. I knew that I had found the

woman of my heart and hand and the most beautiful one at that. We took a honeymoon trip down to Natural Bridge and thence up to Harpers Ferry. On our return we took the superintendent's proposition into a full cognizance. We tore it apart piece by piece, because from the first offer, I felt there was an underlying motive.

It was this: When a man has power over the duly elected officials such as the three district board members and their chosen supervisor, he has power to dictate my own reason and my ideas. When he adds my wife to the "kitty" with everything in his favor, he is not doing it for our sakes alone. There is a deeper motive. Ellen, being a charming young woman, could become the ulterior one, so why wait for a web to be spun when you know you will be the fly caught in it.

Ellen turned the keys, dray wagon, and faithful horse over to Alex and we left the beautiful Elkhorn Mountain with its mining scars to return to Charleston, the state's capital, my hometown.

Chapter 6

Detroit

January 18, 1906

The state of West Virginia was mourning the loss of twenty-four men who died at Coaldale on January 4 of the new year of 1906. The century was young and tragedies seemed to be coming fast and furiously not only in West Virginia but in the United States as well.

The date was January 18, 1906, on a Thursday, exactly two weeks after the Coaldale explosion nearly to the hour. The Detroit Mine on Paint Creek blew up killing eighteen men. (Coaldale blew thirty minutes before noon and Detroit five minutes after.) This one was Kanawha County's worst mine disaster and continues to be so to this day. The county had suffered three small blasts which killed six, seven, and seven and all on Cabin Creek across the mountain from Paint Creek.

At this time, communication in the remote mining areas was by one telephone owned by the mining company exclusively. The next method was by messages sent by railroad, the only means of transportation, except by foot or horseback. Such was the case of the Detroit Mine which was located nine miles from the main line C&O Railroad whose Paint Creek junction was the small town of Pratt, on the Kanawha River below Montgomery.

The newspapers were the only news media of the day, and got their information, sometimes, a day or two after the event and sometimes a slightly overstatement or under estimated account; and sometimes an erroneous story developed.

For example: The first news to reach the Bluefield *Daily Telegraph,* one of the state's leading newspapers, stated that twenty were killed, two of them being blown from the drift mouth down the mountainside and broken and mangled past recognition.[1] This story never materialized but two animals were thus killed in this manner. The paper further thought that twenty-four others were trapped or missing. The actual fact was that eighteen men were in the mine at the time and all perished almost immediately.

The Detroit Mine was a new mine having been operated less than three years, and having cut only 1,300 feet to the farthest heading, with entries and rooms leading off in many directions. Only one drift mouth opened into the hillside 100 feet above the railroad tracks. Coal was sent down an incline in mine cars and dumped into railroad cars. The fact that the mine was not deep into the mountain enabled some miners to come to the outside for dinner (lunch) since many of them left their buckets in the outside buildings.

The mine blew at exactly 12:05 P.M. with incredible force—a dust explosion which carried everything in front of it down the main entry as if from a cannon's mouth. There were no men on the main entry, only in the workings, but the force of the explosion went into the rooms killing all by either fire or blackdamp. At first it was thought that all had been immediately burned to death but later evidence showed that some of them succumbed to afterdamp, the deadly carbon monoxide mixture, that in some cases kills as quickly as fire.

A mule and Shetland pony were tied about 150 feet inside the drift when the blast came. They were blown to the outside and in projectile fashion over the mountainside to the tracks below. Observers of the day claimed that these beasts

1. Bluefield *Daily Telegraph,* Friday morning, January 19, 1906, Vol. 13, No. 60.

were so broken and mangled that their species were only distinguishable by the differences in their hooves.

A drum house was situated just above the drift, the drum being the machine which controlled the cable that controlled the cars up and down the incline. As the concussion came out the mine, the drum house was completely demolished as its materials went flying in all directions. The blacksmith shop, which sat to one side of the drift, went in the same manner; wood timbers and splinters flying down the mountainside. No one eating his dinner on the outside was killed but one had a narrow escape.

There were square-cut timbers 10" X 10's and 8" X 8's used as props. They came out of the mine mouth along with mine cars, the two beasts, and all other types of debris including dust and flame. Everything blew out and went down the mountain but the props. Instead they shot directly across the valley like war missiles, some landing and some burrowing themselves into the mountainside. Luckily no men were caught in the fusillade.

Ventilation by a large fan was damaged by the terrific onslaught of the blast. In order to enter the mine in search of the bodies (all presumed dead), the fan had to be put back in operation and brattices rebuilt to force the air into the explosion area. In late afternoon, repairmen working furiously, had the fan repaired and air going into the workings. The first party inside to explore found the brattice work all demolished. Even with the fan running, there could be no good air. Then came the job of rebuilding brattices which could be done temporarily by stringing up a heavy material resembling burlap and in rolls wide enough to reach from the roof to the floor. Once properly hung, this material channelled the air into its proper course. Some of the original brattice in this mine were stone walls ten feet apart filled in between with gravel and debris. The force of the blast demolished such strongholds and blew them down the haul ways.

By 7:00 P.M., the day of the blast, brattice cloth had been strung sufficiently to allow rescue men to penetrate about 150 yards to where the first body was found. By the early hours of the following morning, all of the bodies had been located. As daylight came, the last of the corpses were brought to the outside.

As the recovery crews penetrated into the working places to get the bodies, they found that several had died from the deadly blackdamp. These victims realized their situations and made no attempts at survival. Some pitiful situations were evident when the positions of the bodies were discovered. One was that of Patrick McGlothlin, who was holding the body of his fourteen-year-old son close to him, as if to ward off the man with the scythe. Another heartbreaking discovery was the two McArdle brothers holding tightly to each other in order to double-team their fight against the Grim Reaper.

When all the bodies were brought out, they were taken to an unused boardinghouse which served as a morgue. Coffins had been shipped to Pratt and brought to Detroit by special train, then hauled by wagons to the improvised morgue where the bodies were washed, dressed, and placed in the boxes. Relatives and friends were not allowed to see any bodies until they were properly prepared. Then all corpses were taken to their homes to await transportation to the various burial grounds.

When relatives of the victims came up Paint Creek on the branch line passenger train and disembarked to meet living kin of the dead, the scene was heartbreaking. The bereaved mothers, sisters, wives, and other kin awaited at the little coal town station for the train's arrival. To see a close kin step from the coach to be met by a tearful wife or mother of a victim was a pitiful sight as they held to each other weeping.

Many of the bodies were shipped to other points to be interred. Eight of these were taken to Hurricane, West Virginia, where all were buried the same day, on Sunday, Janu-

ary 21, 1906, the date of the explosion at Newburg twenty-one years before. The most heartrending case was that of Mrs. G. P. Neale, who put her husband and four brothers, the Bridgemans, away that day in a quiet churchyard. In addition, the brothers, Ben and Charles Snider, and A. M. Sovin were buried in that same Hurricane graveyard. Three McArdle brothers were buried in Mason County. Patrick McGlothlin and his son "Jackie" were laid side by side at the Detroit mining town graveyard.

The Detroit Company, owned by a group of Detroit, Michigan, financiers, sold its holdings to the Paint Creek Colliery Company, who took over the workings on Monday prior to the explosion on Thursday. Two weeks before, the district mine inspector had inspected the mine, found no gas, but did find considerable dust. He ordered that the mine be sprinkled at once. They purchased equipment, had it on the ground outside, but had not put it into operation in the mine. An explosion resulted but no one knew which miner ignited the dust. One theory is that a mixture of dynamite and powder detonated set it off.

Among the victims were seven married men and eleven single men. The casualty list consisted of the four Bridgeman brothers, the three McArdle brothers, the two Snider brothers, and two Miskell brothers. One father and son were the McGlothlins. This made thirteen victims of family groups and one a brother-in-law, G. P. Neale. The four others, not related were: A. M. Sovin, Ed Friglan, Isaac Pancake, and Claude Sanders.

When the coroner's jury met on February 22, 1906, to investigate and take evidence on the cause or causes of the Detroit Mine explosion of January 18, 1906, it, the jury, came up with a verdict that was unheard of and frowned upon by coal companies, state mine inspectors, and somewhat by state politicians who catered to the coal interests.

The conclusion was that the mine superintendent, Mr.

Minor, and mine foreman, Mr. Townsend, at Detroit Mine were negligent and careless in their duty; that the state mine inspector, Mr. Hill, was negligent in his inspections; and that the three were guilty of voluntary manslaughter of the eighteen men who died as a result. The jury charged the coal company as negligent and careless in its responsibilities.

The jury decided the explosion came as a result of a shot or shots fired on the solid which ignited dust which was prevalent in excessive amounts. They further recommended that a law be enacted to prohibit further shooting on the solid.

POSTSCRIPT

The Detroit Mine and the coal town no longer exist. The West Virginia Turnpike moved almost all the houses. The mine has fallen in and only a scar is left on the mountainside where its rude mouth gave up the eighteen human bodies in 1906. Somewhere on the hillsides nearby sleep a few of the victims, two of them being "Jackie" McGlothlin, who died at fourteen with his protective father who lies beside him.

During warm weather, snakes pervade the area, many of them poisonous species. This person was warned not to attempt to climb to the old mine site lest he be "eat up by rattlesnakes and copperheads."

No longer does a branch line train run up the "holler." However, a macadam highway now gives those who live on Paint Creek access to the outside.

Chapter 7

Parral

Tuesday, February 8, 1906

Summerlee, a mining town five miles from Fayetteville, West Virginia, with its pretty name was once called Parral. To people around Fayette County and southern West Virginia, it was at one time a dirty name, one that spelled horror and death in 1906, because twenty-three men and boys died there. Thence, the name changed from Parral to Summerlee. Today the mine is about worked out but the black old tipple still stands, a somber reminder that deep down, 685 feet vertical, that the burned and decomposed bodies were hoisted into the daylight that they could not see, because they died in the darkness.

The company store continues to serve the wants of those who remain in the houses once owned by the company. The valley is beautiful especially in the springtime, since it lies in a region not too rugged by overbearing hills. On February 8, 1906, people were looking forward to the coming of spring. Mining people always have a fear of what can happen at their mine and they knew vividly of what happened at Detroit twenty days before just across the mountains not too far away.

The Parral shaft, the deepest in the state at that time, was a sister mine to the Stuart Colliery less than a mile away. There was only one shaft down with the promise of connecting underground to the Stuart Mine. A state law had been passed that all shaft mines must have at least two openings.

Parral was one and one-half years old, producing coal daily in strict violation of the state law.

The farthest driven entry was about 600 feet to the east. The other main entry ran west. In this east entry, a fault had been encountered and much driving was being done to overcome the obstruction. It is generally known that in deep mines more methane is generated near a fault than otherwise. On this fateful day, it is believed that an enormous slate fall had occurred—it was found to be so after the explosion—or the fall had resulted from an extra heavy dynamite charge. This fall caused the accumulation of much more gas than usual. The mine officials and bosses knew that Parral was a "hot" mine, and made inspections each shift before the men entered their working places. In addition, the mine had a six-foot air compressed fan that supposedly delivered sufficient air. In the opinion of all concerned the mine was safe. The company had employed from England, Miles Pratt, educated and experienced in gaseous and deep mines. He had been with the company two years and at Parral one month. He was also considered the best and safest man in the entire region.

When the mine blew there was no heavy rumbling, but a spurt of flame and a gigantic report followed by billowing smoke, such as at Red Ash-Rush Run the year before. Enough jar and smoke resulted to let those on the outside know that the mine had exploded.

Fred Dixon, the general manager of the company, was a short distance away from the shaft mouth when the mine blew. He rushed there and immediately helped to organize a rescue party. It was soon discovered that the cage was fouled on the shaft bottom, and could not be released. Hot air fumes and some smoke were pouring from the pit. Luckily the fan was not knocked out and continued to run.[1] An

1. A fan that continues to run is not of the greatest immediate benefit since all stops and brattices that control the airflow are torn out.

improvised hoist had to be put into service; when in operation, a crew started down but fumes forced them back. After two hours, the bucket went down but could only get within twenty feet of the bottom. Ladders were gotten and on the next attempt, Mr. Dixon clambered down first. To their surprise and joy, they found twelve men and boys, frightened, injured with burns and bruises, expecting a recurrent blast any minute, huddled underneath the cage. Luckily the air was good there. Four of these men had attempted to scale the 685-foot wall with bare hands grasping protruding rocks and crevices. They got only twenty feet and gave up. One fourteen-year-old boy, Robert Pratt, was the son of Miles Pratt, the mine boss. His father and brother John had perished deep in the mine. These rescued men had been working in another section to the west and were not caught in the fire and force of the blast, but rushed to the shaft bottom and were saved.

The blast killed all the men working the east heading near the fault. They were badly burned and some mutilated.

Very little progress was made Thursday night, only about seventy-five feet being probed into the entry, but six bodies were found Friday morning in the east first right. On Sunday morning, fifteen more bodies were taken from the head of the working about 600 feet from the shaft bottom. They had begun to decompose badly. The last body was found and removed from the pit on Tuesday, making a total of twenty-three. The mine was thoroughly searched and it was declared that all bodies had been found.

Mine Chief Paul was irate and much distraught that this was his third major mine explosion in thirty-four days. He was upset that the Stuart Company had not complied with the law. When everything was cleared at the mine, Inspector Paul went before the grand jury at Fayetteville and swore out warrants against Fred Dixon and other officials for involuntary manslaughter. Mr. Dixon was a well-known politician

and it was considered that Paul had stuck his head into a lion's mouth. Several others along with Dixon were charged with misdemeanors. The result was that the whole thing was soon thrown out of the courts and the operators were given a clean slate. Paul was asked why he did such an awful thing to the powers that were. He stated that he had to do his duty regardless.

THE LIST OF DEAD

Brown, John
Calloway, George
Carlson, Carl
Cook, John
Howchick, Martin
Hunter, James
Johnson, Charles
Jones, George
Jones, Oscar
Lumly, Joseph
Madison, William
Martens, Alfred
Morris, Oliver
Pratt, John (son)
Pratt, Miles (father)
Scorier, Hans
Silveria, Cupina
Spears, Isaac
Swann, James
Taylor, Josh
Tompkins, Robert
Wells, Cave
White, Joseph

Only four of the victims were married.

Chapter 8

Century

March 22, 1906

In that fateful year of 1906 during the winter and spring, the coal seams of West Virginia took their wrath out on the poor souls who disturbed their secrets that were bedded down in the Carboniferous Age. First, the new year had hardly begun when Coaldale took twenty-two men in the Elkhorn Mountain bordering Virginia. Exactly two weeks later, the Detroit Mine on Paint Creek of the Kanawha River took eighteen lives. Three weeks later on the plateau near Oak Hill and Fayetteville, the Parral shaft wiped out the existence of twenty-three more humans, and then on March 22, the first day of spring, just as the state's mining people hoped their mine tragedies were over, another blast came at the Century Mine several miles to the north in Barbour County, when another twenty-three miners perished. Thus the story of the Century blast unfolds.

The coal mining town of Century on U.S. Route 119, lies in a mild rolling valley, with moderate hills, more like a peaceful, upland farming country. But valuable coal lies in these hills and money can be made if capital is invested. And so was it in 1900 when the Shaw Brothers of Baltimore opened the Century Mine. As usual, the company built its own houses for its miners and their families, opened a company store, and asked for a school. The church would be optional according to the denominations.

Newsprint of the day stated that labor was scarce in the rural area near Century and miners had to be imported to dig

the coal. The Century Coal Company, not unlike the other colliers of the state, hired labor as cheaply as could be gotten and foreigners could be hired for lower wages. In 1906, there was no United Mine Workers Union. In this period in America, a great horde of Slavics and Italians immigrated into the United States. Thus the Century Mine hired many Polish laborers, who were far better paid here than in Europe. The mine owners exploited this fact.

On a cold March 22, Thursday afternoon, at 4:45 P.M., the Century Mine blew up in one section as a result of an excessive accumulation of dust, according to the coroner's jury verdict. Twenty-one Polish immigrants and two Americans perished instantly. The force of the explosion was terrific since many of the victims were dismembered.[1] The bodies were found in the subheadings of the mine and all were recovered by late Friday. The interment of all bodies took place Saturday and Sunday following the Thursday blast.

All the mine disorders of 1906 were on Thursday and thence the Century tragedy was called by the miners "Black Thursday."[2]

The Philippi paper stated that the Century tragedy was the worst that had ever struck the mining district of that area.

When the blast occurred there were about one hundred men in the mine. Since the explosion did not engulf the whole working sections, seventy-five men were brought out safely. The mine had had no previous accidents and was considered a very safe one. Regular inspections by the State Department of Mines had been made and the mine okayed. The coroner's jury was not always so easily influenced by the power of the mine operators. In the case of Century, the company was blamed for permitting too much dust to

1. Old-timers vowed that a motorman ran down many of the scared and fleeing miners, tearing them to pieces while trying to get away from the explosion. This accounted for the mangling.

2. The Charleston *Gazette,* March 24, 1906, Vol. 19, No. 333.

accumulate. The owners protested the jury's verdict. The inspection in almost all cases stated a safe mine, but she exploded regardless, leaving the mine inspector's judgment in question. But in some cases the inspectors were ignored by the operators, as in the cases of the Parral and Stuart.

The Century has a human-interest story quite unlike all the others. As usual, when this terrible thing happens, the wives, fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, and the children rush to the scene in a state of near hysteria, a scene that only an onlooker can imagine. At Century, the wives of the Polish miners rushed to the shaft mouth in a panic, understanding only a few words of English, and somewhat oblivious to mining horrors where tragedy strikes. These pitiful women did not intend to stop at the mine mouth, and started rushing to board the cage or climb down into the dark pit to bring out their husbands and sons. Luckily the foremost were caught before they attempted to enter the pit. Had they succeeded, they would have been lost in the total darkness. Quickly, men had to be marshalled to hold them back by force.

Many of the women were scantily clad but stayed outside the mine all night in freezing weather by a fire awaiting word of their men who never saw daylight again.

LIST OF VICTIMS*

Anders, Frank
Cauches, John
Condas, Enoch (married)
Dreogotta, Andrew (married)
Dublasky, Thomas (married)
Jones, Charles (single)
Jones, T. (married)
Kuablinsky, Stanley (single)
Maras, Nuy (married)
Mazella, James (married)

*This list, taken from the county clerk's office at Philippi, did not list the entire twenty-three men. The doctor who submitted the names listed all as dying from asphyxiation.

The names of two victims failed to be listed on the death register at the Barbour County Courthouse.

Menhass, Joe
Mitaloveth, Joe (married)
Mykis, Joe (married)
Penitile, Nich (single)
Rohalla, John (single)
Rubynsky, Frank (single)
Smolonis, Simon (single)
Waylick, Joe (married)
Ziderovick, August (married)
Ziewiski, Jim (married)
Zuchaniich, Adam (married)

POSTSCRIPT TO CENTURY

Today Century still produces some coal but is about worked out. The shaft is about one hundred eighty feet deep into the Redstone seam, which is about a five-foot average in height.

The coal camp is about two miles off U.S. Route 119 and is located up a muddy sloping hollow overlooking the shaft. The company sold the houses to individuals who renovated them to make the coal camp into a pretty and peaceful looking village with a small park near the only store. Old-timers sit on a wall joking and spinning yarns of bygone days.

Strip mining has taken over and in the main valley, split by U.S. 119, is a jumble of gob piles, spilt coal, scarred hillsides, and ugliness in general, the spoilage of a once beautiful and gentle rolling valley.

Old-timers say that one of the Shaw family is a frequent visitor to Century, is well liked and respected by all.

Chapter 9

Stuart

January 29, 1907

85 Killed

Stuart is a Scottish name that played quite a "hot" role in Britain's history. The first colorful one was Mary Stuart, Queen of the Scots, who lost her head twice, once by love's fancy over Lord Boswell, and finally at the execution block. She was the first "hot" one. Then there was Charles Stuart, or Charles II who had his Nell Gwynn and many other beautiful ladies of the English Court. He made history, not by being a great king, but by being a "hot" Stuart.

Humor takes away the sting of tragedy. The hottest Stuart of them all was a deep hole sunk into a plateau in the hills of West Virginia. This inanimate Stuart took the lives of eighty-five men with a hideous belch of flame on a cold Tuesday afternoon, January 29, 1907, at exactly 1:25 o'clock.

The Stuart shaft was 585 feet deep vertical into the Sewell coal seam. Only one hole down served for two hoisting compartments, meaning that there were two separate guideways for cages to glide up and down. On one side there was a brick compartment way to serve as an air course with a large fan above. Another smaller compartment contained all water pipes and electric wiring into the mine, protecting them from freezing and accidents. There was no man-cage, therefore, workmen rode the coal hoisting cages to and from the bottom. (The one shaft instead of two was a gross violation of state mining law.)

Similar to Stuart was her sister mine, Parral, belonging to

the same company, mining the same seam, with only one shaft, also a violation of state law. Parral had blown up the previous March killing twenty-three men. The two mines were not connected by underground tunnels, but the company had been ordered to do so by state mining authorities. The company claimed that it was pushing work to connect the two mines, however, it was mining coal on a full scale at the same time. Company orders were to have enough men driving the tunnel so it could be said that the work was progressing. (There were only two men driving the passageway when the mine blew up.)

On the day of the tragedy, a wreck in the shaft caused damage to the cage guides, and about three hours passed before coal hoisting resumed. In addition, a motor wrecked in one of the main haul ways keeping empties from being brought to the loading rooms and headings. The men loaded out the coal that they had down and by orders from the contractors, began "knocking off" for the day, or the remainder of the shift. The miners began walking to the shaft bottom to catch the cage to the outside. Some of the fortunate men who caught the cage and came out before the explosion by ten minutes or less were: George Peterson, Lester Bullock, Oliver Tier, Jack Walker, Maxwell Tueson, and Charles Mathews.

Some of the men were on their way to the shaft bottom while others were already there waiting for the cage to return from the top. The mine had driven only a fifth of a mile underground and miners did not have far to walk to and from the headings. The last of the miners on this fateful day to leave their places and head for the bottom were the trapper boys who closed the doors so that the air was controlled. A few men remained at work, two of them being the ones driving the entry toward Parral. The cage had just returned to the bottom to pick up another load of men when the explo-

sion went off. Most of the dead were found near and at the bottom.

At this time in mining history, men were required to buy their own explosives and detonators and to shoot down their own coal to load. Many of them carried these explosives in their pockets or on their person. When the explosion went off, these men were horribly mangled, some beyond recognition.

When the mine blew, debris came hurtling from the pit and rained for a minute. A spurt of flame shot out for a few seconds, followed by a loud report. Then a volume of smoke billowed skyward for several minutes and then died down.

The cage had been shifted before the explosion, from its guides which had become clogged with ice. However, men had kept the cage going up and down enough to carry workmen. When the explosion came, it fouled the elevator on the shaft bottom until the hoist on top could not budge it. The force of the blast knocked the fan out of running order but did not damage it seriously. Workmen immediately began trying to restore it to running order.

A bucket, the round type used to hoist muck, was attached to a cable from the drum house and put into operation. Two men started down but did not go very far until forced back because of the bad air and intense heat. Two hours later the workmen got the fan started which forced the hot foul air from the pit. In the meantime, men were being organized into rescue teams to enter the blast-torn mine.

Fred Dixon, general manager of the Stuart Colliery, and W. C. Colburn, superintendent, reached the bottom first. Other rescue men followed to find many bodies nearby. The removal of those close to the bottom was rapid but when deeper penetration began, the task became more difficult. Slate falls, wrecked mine cars, and broken timbers littered the entries. At first it was hoped that the two men driving the tunnel might be found alive, but such was not the case. Hope

faded for all but the two when they reached bottom. Soon it was evident that none could have survived.

The last bodies were recovered within a week—bringing the total known dead to eighty-five. Newspapers reported eighty-seven then eighty-six and finally eighty-five. (It is thought that possibly two were never found since they were contractor's men and the company kept no record of them.)

After a mine explosion, the first question asked is, "What caused it?" Many theories are advanced but the truth is generally known from the beginning. A mine blows from gas, dust, or a combination of both. Gas as a rule starts the fire. What set off the gas?

In Stuart all the men used open lights and the mine had gas, although the fire bosses claimed that they had found the mine relatively free of it. Stuart was a dry mine, hardly a water seepage anywhere, and the dust was enormous. State mine inspectors cautioned mine officials to keep the inside wetted down with sprinklers. Therefore, the mine had some methane and was very dusty, a perfect setup for an explosion where dynamite was shot from the solid and men carried open lights, matches, and smoked whenever they desired. (None of this is permitted in mines today by state law.)

Further investigation showed that possibly a lone miner entered room four off third left entry and his open light had ignited a pocket of gas which in turn fired the dust. The first conclusion was that a shot on the solid in third left had set it off. Some critics stated that the company had recently hired some inexperienced foreigners who went to work in the area where the blast originated and possibly had set it off by lack of knowledge of mine safety.

When the mine was probed and investigated, it was found that 1,000 feet still lay unconnected between the two mines. Every effort being put forth was the work of two miners only, Harry Colburn and John Atkinson, digging the passageway with pick and shovel.

Among the victims were several boys of school age. Frank Loving, thirteen, and his brother, Harry, sixteen, trapper boys, were killed. David and Isaiah Fitz were teenage brothers. John Kwak and his teenage son, Charlie, died at the same time. Cecil and Norman Crouse were brothers.

LIST OF VICTIMS

Arthur, Jesse
Atkinson, John
Banks, Enos
Baur, Joe
Barber, Hanley
Bendijson, Bein
Blake, Walker
Boone, Wilson
Bradley, James
Bromer, James
Bryant, Gay
Bushnell, Whit
Carter, Judson
Caul, Charley
Clendennin, Otley
Coble, Charles
Colburn, Harry S.
Cook, W. M.
Cowan, John
Crouse, Cecil
Crouse, Norman
Crubin, Sovenz
Dairs, Cyrus
Dairs, George
Donnell, Mike
Eckersley, James
Estus, Thomas
Fey, John
Fitz, David
Fitz, Isaiah
Fitzpatrick, Ballard
Geurs, Stephen
Gordon, William
Hamilton, W. J.
Harrigge, Thomas
Hawkins, William
Howlet, Samuel
Ison, Raleigh
Johnson, C. A.
Johnson, Paul
Jones, Paul
Kalisz, John
Klimak, James
Kosz, William
Kryskzka, Mike
Kwak, Charlie
Kwak, John
Kwak, Andrew
Lee, Richard
Lewis, Richard
Light, Frank
Love, Dallas
Loving, Harry
Loving, Frank
Loving, Lester
Massey, James

Minner, Giles
Minner, John
Mooney, Shelton
Morris, John
McIntyre, Robert
McQueen, William
Nakusok, William
Nydszyn, Michael
O'Boyle, J. T.
Polaus, Stanley
Prather, T. S.
Puloski, Frank
Ross, Henry
Sears, William P.
Sedoir, Stephen
Sichnowsky, Stanley
Simpson, Earl
Skaggs, Geet
Smith, Charlie
Sosmck, Andrew
Thomas, Arthur
Toney, T. M.
Turner, Alexander
Vergie, Charles
Walkden, William
Williams, Thomas
Wolfsteinholme, S.
Zuel, Thomas

POSTSCRIPT

Today the place is called Lochgelly retaining its Scottish name given to Stuart shortly after the 1907 tragedy. The name was changed to enable the company to hire men to work the mine. The company has worked out the lease leaving a quiet countryside with its memories of a once prosperous colliery. Hard roads lead to an expressway enabling miners to live in Lochgelly and commute to other jobs. The tipple is to be torn down and the black hole that gave up eighty-five dead in 1907 will be filled and sealed.

Chapter 10

Thomas

February 4, 1907

25 Killed

The West Virginia State Department of Mines had rested for nearly eleven months without a disastrous mine explosion. There were great hopes by all concerned that some of the causes of these catastrophes had been conquered. January 1907, had come and nearly gone when a powder explosion at Penco killed twelve men on January 26, however, this was the unusual type of accident, not an explosion. Then three days later one of the most horrible of all the state's history to date blew at Stuart killing eighty-five men. The rescue men and state officials were at Stuart investigating and assisting in the cleanup when on February 4, seven days after Stuart, the Thomas Mine at Thomas, in Tucker County, many miles to the north, exploded and killed twenty-five men. The State Mine Department had its hands full.

The Thomas Mine of the Davis Coal and Coke Company was located directly across a small valley from the main street of the town of Thomas, which was not a coal camp as mining towns were, but a place with many businesses owned by individuals. The buildings were all on one side of the main street and the railroad on the other side, but no houses. When the explosion came, people could look across the stream directly at the place of the catastrophe, 150 yards away.

The explosion came on Monday at 7:00 A.M. just as the men entered the mine for the first shift. Some of the men had reached the headings—a mile underground. When the

blast came, it was first reported that forty had died and were entombed. Immediately a rescue crew headed by R. W. Jones, mine foreman, entered the mine and just a short distance inside came upon the bodies of eight men, seven of them mangled and unrecognizable. The gas fumes became so evident that the rescuers had to retreat. Jones picked up the dead body of Oscar Allen and carried him to the outside where Jones collapsed and died.

Miners and workmen from other mines came to Thomas as quickly as possible to help in the rescue operations. No attempts were made to enter the mine again until the fan was put into operation and air courses were bratticed in order that the fan could force out the poisonous fumes. Officials claimed that the fan had been damaged thus making ventilation a problem. Other sources stated that the fan had not been in operation since Friday preceding the explosion and had not been started that fateful morning. Miners claimed that Jones, the mine boss, knew all this but allowed the miners to enter regardless. In fact, the Thomas Mine was a sure deathtrap that morning.

This section of West Virginia is east of most of the mining areas and had never witnessed a mine catastrophe nor any other calamity of such magnitude. People rushed to the scene from all directions; however, there was only one passenger train in service on the Western Maryland Railway. Other means of transportation were horseback, buggy, wagon, or on foot. Nevertheless, curiosity overran the small town of Thomas.

Scenes of hysterical relatives crowding around the mine mouth was not as intense as in most mine disasters. This was due to the fact that almost all the men killed were foreigners without families in and around Thomas. One newspaper reporter inferred that the case was not so awful as could be since almost all of the victims were Italians and Polanders. Since most of them—as we stated—had no families, the scenes

were not heartbreaking and pitiful as in some of the state's prior mine explosions.

By nightfall, the most experienced miners from other coal towns were on hand and ready to enter the mine. By 7:00 A.M. crack crews were already probing the entries for bodies. By midday, Tuesday, all those known to be missing were located and brought to the outside and sent to the undertaker's. James Ott, general manager and part owner of the mine, was on hand and sent representatives to all mining families to see if there were any miners unaccounted for.

Mr. Ott and other officials of the mine issued statements that they were unaware of any reasons why the mine blew up. No mention was made about the fan being idle over the weekend or lack of inspections of the mine by fire bosses and mine foreman; that no outside board was marked OK before the men entered the mine.

One report was that the night shift was just leaving the mine and the day shift entering and that the relatives of the night men rushed to the mine in fear that these night men had been caught in the blast. It was also stated that the mine blew about 6:30 A.M. Monday. In all probability, there was no night shift, since it was Monday and the work week was just beginning. The investigation by the coroner's jury did not indicate that a shift had entered during Sunday night.

The coroner's jury condemned the coal company for neglect of ventilation and proper instruction, but no mention was made of Jones, the mine foreman, who died from asphyxiation after carrying the body of Oscar Allen from the pit. But men blamed Jones because of his neglect and that he did not mark the mine board outside which would have prevented the men from entering.

Old-timers state that no inspections or markup of danger was put on the outside board.

The coroner's verdict was that the men came to their death by the ventilating machinery not being in motion and the

following are responsible for the same: "Arthur Stewart, fire boss, that on the extent of entering the mine on February 4, 1907, and had failed to see that the ventilating machinery was not in motion, that he failed to make a thorough and complete examination of the mine, and discovered the gas that must have accumulated. Mr. Oddum as mine boss failed to properly instruct the men on entering, The Davis Coal and Coke Company, that they allowed the incompetent men to occupy the responsible position of running the ventilation machinery. This is one of the few times that a coroner's jury has condemned a coal company."

LIST OF VICTIMS OF THE THOMAS DISASTER

Allen, Oscar
Arscari, Joseph
Barunian, Adam
Basiach, John
Bennemento, Ernest
Beziac, Joe
Bottice, Vincent
Dandrea, Ralph
Ferrin, Frank
Jones, D. L.
Julian, Felix
Kankelas, Dan
Karlois, Conctantine
Kuroch, Frank
Lastroppo, Harry
Liberatori, Sullivan
Pamepinto, Charley
Polowich, Frank
Polowich, Tom
Sabowosky, John
Scarponi, John
Scarponi, Tony
Serpone, John
Shavitch, Frank
Stucine, Frank

Chapter 11

Whipple

May 1, 1907

The Fayette *Journal,* a weekly newspaper printed at Fayetteville, West Virginia, headlined this story on May 3, 1907, "Whipple Lets Go." Today, one might think that a sports championship was in the making, but the punctuation indicated something different. The case was something tragic meaning that the Whipple Mine on Wednesday, May 1, at 3:30 P.M. had let go with a gas explosion that killed or fatally injured fifteen men. Five of this number died of blackdamp while trying to reach safety. Two more died later in the Miner's McKendree Hospital on New River.[1]

The explosion occurred in one heading only, allowing fifty-three men in other parts of the mine to come out alive, some by the way of the air shaft. Other miners deep in the mine, in various sections, did not feel the concussion and continued to work until quitting time, or were notified by rescue men. The explosion was not terrific like that of the Stuart three months before, but was forceful enough to shove the cage all the way out of the shaft and foul it against the bull wheel at the top of the tipple. Some parts of the tipple covering were blown away. Luckily the big fan that forced over 25,000 cubic feet of air per minute into the mine never missed a revolution. Some smoke came out of the shaft after the blast.

Within minutes after the explosion, rescue men were

1. The McKendree Hospital no longer exists. It was located in the New River Canyon below Prince and was only accessible by train in 1907.

climbing down the 450-foot ladder in the air shaft, which was only 100 feet from the main shaft. On their first penetration into the mine, they met men rushing to the bottom and still using their open lights, a very dangerous thing after an explosion. Some of the men were burned but none seriously. In going into the workings, they were surprised to find men working unmindful that the mine had blown up.

When the rescue party started up the entry toward the West Rock Heading, they found their first bodies about 150 feet from the shaft bottom. These men had come out of their working places unhurt but died shortly afterwards. Several were found later, two of them badly burned, and some slightly burned. Near the heading all the remaining bodies were found; indications showed that they had died instantly by fire. By the next day, all the bodies had been removed from the exploded section and the investigation of cause or causes was begun.

The Whipple mine was located across the mountain from Parral and Stuart, it being on the drain waters of White Oak Creek while the two Stuart Colliery Mines were on the Loop Creek side. Whipple was considered the best equipped mine in the area and unlike the two Loop Creek colleries, had an air shaft in addition to the hoisting shaft, and was not in violation of state law. The famous and valuable Sewell seam was the source of the Whipple coal and was not considered very gaseous. Also a waterline was piped into the mine for the purpose of keeping down any excess dust. Nevertheless, she blew.

When all the search and evidence was collected, a conclusion was reached that the cause was due to miners shooting on the solid. This practice was forbidden by the mine authorities and the company. It was found that two men, both killed, had bored consecutive holes into the coal facing and had inserted dynamite charges. One of the detonations was supposed to have set off the tragedy. Gas was, no doubt,

prevalent, and when a shot on the solid was put off, much of the coal was pulverized into a flour-like dust which is highly explosive.

The mine officials wanted to blame the miner who did it, but the world always asks why the man in charge does not prevent his workmen's errors by proper supervision.

The mine belonged to the White Oak Fuel Company and the superintendent was a Mr. Clark. At first the cause of the explosion was not known, but this report was given out as is in every explosion, that one of the two things or both—gas and dust and usually both—with gas igniting the dust.

THE VICTIMS

Armstrong, Robert (married)
Burgess, Charles (married)
Burgess, Hutson (married)
Ercole, Giovanni (?)
Farnsworth, James (?)
Joseph, Phorah (?)
Kelly, Arnold (single)
Langton, John (?)
Longworth, Samuel (?)
Milton, H. L. (?)
Smith, Ed. (married)
Stamper, George (married)
Thompson, John (married)
Tucker, Raleigh (single)
Wiley, Ross (single)

One man climbed the escape ladder 500 feet to the surface with both hands badly burned.

Two men, H. L. Milton and Phorah Joseph, died in the McKendree Hospital of their burns. Joseph lived five days and Milton lived fourteen days after the accident.

POSTSCRIPT

Today the shaft is filled and a concrete slab is over the cavity. A portion of one wall stands, the last evidence of a hoisting building. All else is desolation, awaiting nature to return and take over.

The wall is symbolic of Shelley's sonnet, "Ozymandias," "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone stand in the desert."

Chapter 12

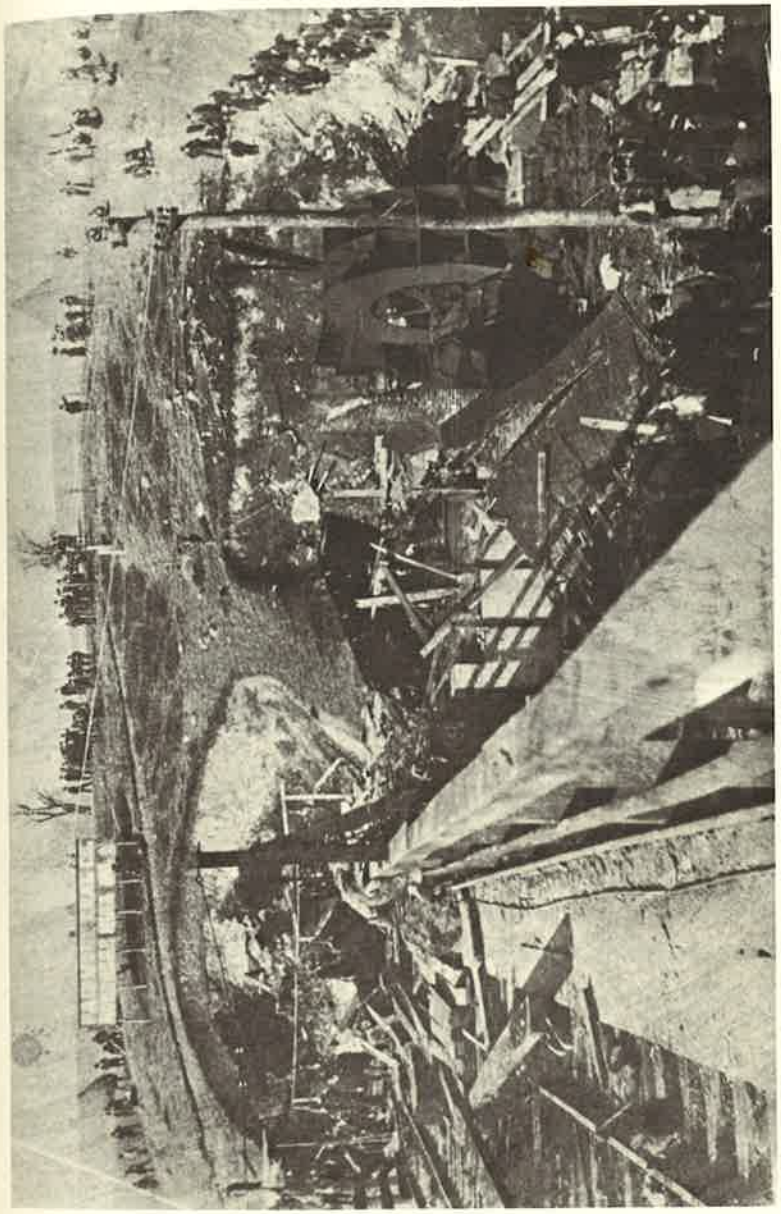
Monongah

December 6, 1907

The mines did not work on Thursday. That evening the whistle blew at the powerhouse, its long wailing blast, the signal that on the morrow, Friday, every man at Monongah must report for work, all 500 or more. There were two mines cut together and they produced a lot of coal for their own coke ovens, and to ship to northern steel mills also.

The men were glad to hear the signal because Christmas was less than three weeks away. Displays were already on at the company store where the men could charge. Up at Clarksburg and down at Fairmont, the stores were readying for the holidays. On Friday morning, December 6, 1907, the men and boys walked to the pits in a cold drizzling rain. The barometer was low and the humidity high. Once inside the mine the men were free from the inclemency of the weather.

At 2:20 P.M. the motorman came out of the No. 6 mine with a trip of sixteen loaded cars. The coal seam dipped downward gently for about 2,000 feet into the mine from the drift mouth then leveled off. At the pit mouth there was an incline that rose several feet to cross the river to a tipple on the side opposite the mine mouth. From an apex of this incline or bridge to the level of the mine floor inside, was about one-half mile. As the motorman crossed the river, his train broke in two at a coupling allowing eight cars to start rolling backward. The farther, the faster they ran until they struck bottom where they wrecked with a terrific impact. At this instant the mine blew up. Fire spurted out the mouth of



Scene of devastation at the mouth of No. 8 Mine, Monongah.
(Courtesy of Charles A. Frazier, Newburg, West Virginia.)

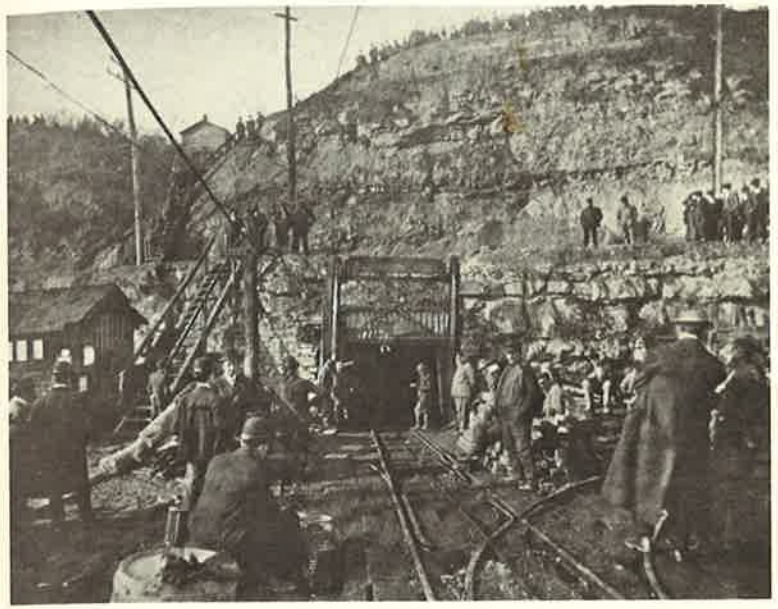
No. 6, and a few seconds later, No. 8 mine blew with noise that is indescribable.

The two mines were bored into the mountain on the west side of the West Fork River, i.e., on the right side going upriver toward Shinnston. The larger part of the town lies on the west bank and on the mountainside above the pits. The older portion of the town of Monongah lay opposite the mines on the east side where the company store, bank, and company owned houses were. No. 8 Mine slightly over one mile upstream, opened at the best elevation to bring out coal, cross the river on a trestle, and dump on the east bank, in the same manner No. 6 did. The two mines were similar to a large staple or letter "U"—square shaped and wide based with each prong pointing toward the river. Underneath the mountain, the entries, haulageways, rooms, and headings resembled a gigantic labyrinth.

Monongah got its name from Monongahela River by dropping the last three letters. The West Fork River flows placidly by Monongah on its way to join the Tygart at Fairmont and create the Monongahela thence down to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to join the Allegheny and form the Ohio. The mining town of Monongah was the biggest one in northern West Virginia with a count of 3,000 souls. The mines produced more coal from the big Pittsburgh seam, seven feet high, than any other mine in the region. The Fairmont Coal Company, who operated Nos. 6 and 8 mines, was owned in part by C. W. Watson, president and majority stockholder, but the company was a subsidiary of the Consolidation Coal Company.

A streetcar line ran from Fairmont up to Clarksburg and was labelled as one of the fastest in the world. The tracks skirted the West Fork River running under the inclines or trestles of the two mines. Men from both north and south could work at Monongah by commuting. An interurban car ran every twenty minutes. Extra cars were parked on a siding

between the mouth of the two mines. Everything was convenient in those days, but the specter with the death head and black robe reaped his biggest harvest at Monongah.



Mouth of No. 6 Mine where no devastation occurred. However, wreckage inside was equal to No. 8 destruction. (Courtesy of West Virginia Department of Archives and History.)

The runaway trip leaves us with the deduction that the crash started the blast. When all the officials and mine experts examined the mine, they said, "No." The final verdict was that a "blow out shot" set it off. What is a "blow out shot"? In early days of coal mining, the workman had to shoot his own coal, i.e., he had to drill or bore a hole into the solid coal six feet or more, place in dynamite or black powder charge to the farthest depth. He inserted a fuse from the explosive to extend to the outside of the hole, then he tamped the shot or "dobied" the hole. If he became careless

Coal cars blown from No. 8 Mine by force of blast at Monongah.
(Courtesy of West Virginia Department of Archives and History.)

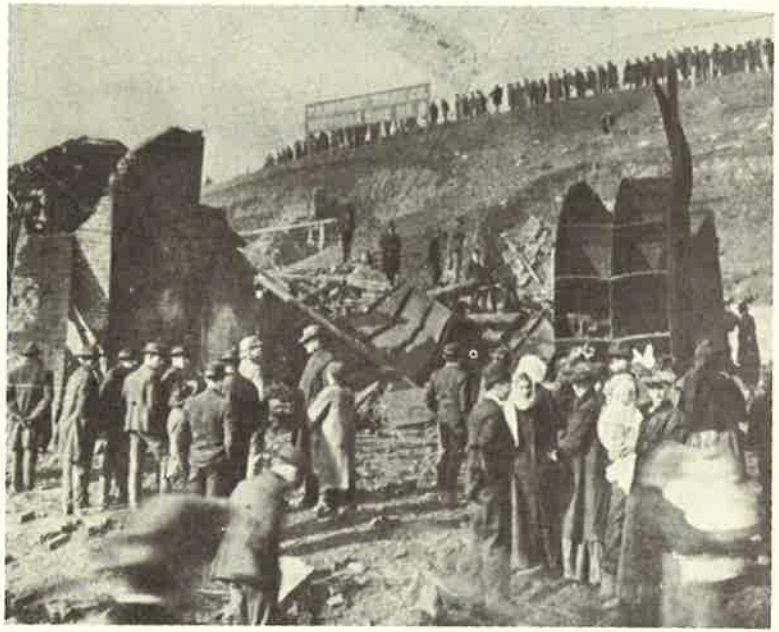
or in a hurry and did a poor job of tamping, the shot would blow out not bringing the coal down. As it blew out, a streak of fire came with it. Such a blaze could ignite gas or coal dust thereby causing an explosion.

Nobody knows or will anyone ever know the exact place or the exact flame that set off the world's worst mine disaster up to this time. Inspectors and officials dallied and surmised and said they could not see any reason why it happened. They said that the mine had been duly inspected, with no gas registering on the safety lamps; that several fire bosses were constantly on duty at the time. They also stated that no appreciable dust existed. The old-timers say differently. One man, now living, stated that the dust was hip deep at the place where the run-a-way mine cars wrecked.

When 361 men (more no doubt) entered the mine that December 6 morning, they took 361 reasons for an explosion by carrying 361 open-flame lights. Every time the motor arm arced on the trolly wire, a chance for a blowup existed; and countless other ways that today are prohibited by state and federal laws. The method of forcing air into a mine, or sucking the air through a mine as the case might be, was not so well tested in 1907. Many miners thought that too much air in a mine put oxygen to the methane gas to support a blowup. Also there was a rumor that since the Monongah Mine was idle on Thursday, the fans were also idle. Several men had worked the day previous to the blowup getting ready for a full run on Friday.

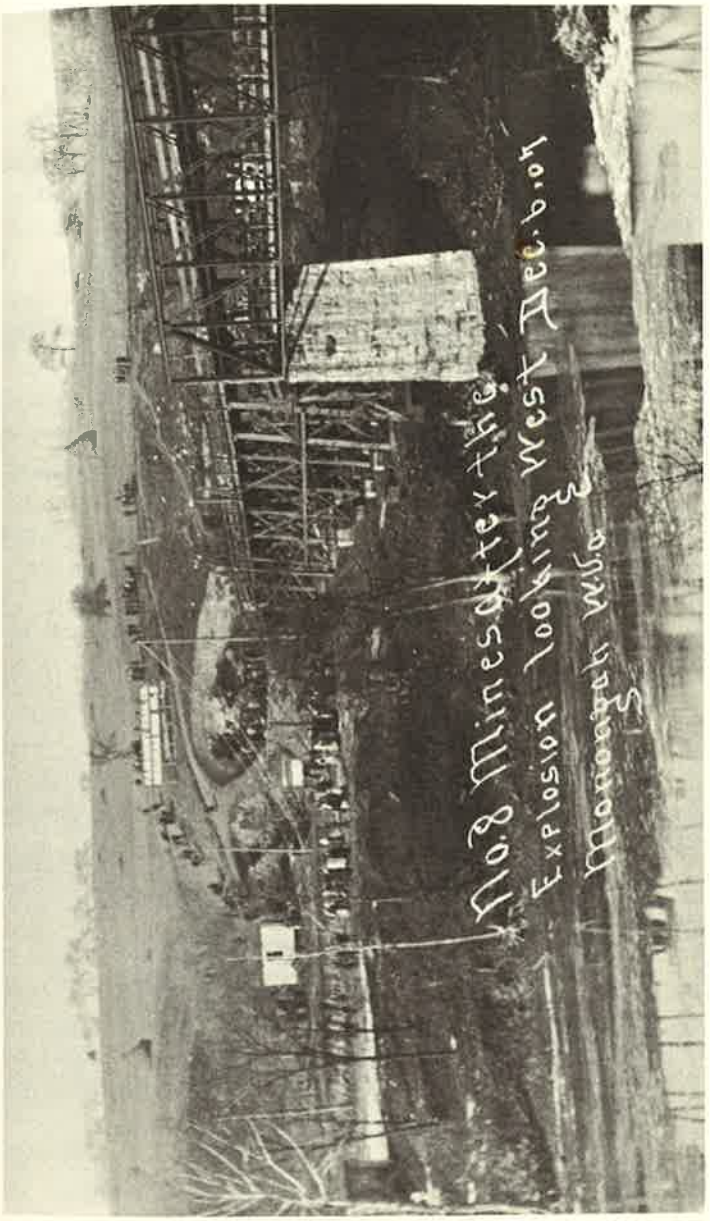
It blew with a jar, an artillery-like report, a flame, an earth shake, and billows of smoke. Concrete sidewalks buckled and broke, the streets opened in fissures in places, buildings shook, tottered, and some old weak ones collapsed. People rushed outside in horror and amazement, knowing what had happened, since mining towns near "hot" mines are always aware that the mines can explode. Soon panic broke loose with people rushing downhill toward the mines, some going

toward the No. 6 Mine mouth, some toward the No. 8. Such a blast must have killed all men and boys inside, was felt by all. Those related to the men inside, especially the women, became near crazed. One woman pulled her hair out by the handful; another woman disfigured her face with her fingernails, screaming frantically in the meantime.



Fan house and other building blown completely away, and fan torn from its moorings at No. 8 Mine. (Courtesy of Clay Fullen, Monongah, West Virginia.)

The force of the explosion at No. 8 blew away the fan house, wrecked the fan's workings, destroyed the boiler house completely, caused the mouth of the mine to close from an earth cave-in which destroyed the drift mouth facing. Some of the buildings near the drift mouth were blown across the West Fork River landing in pieces on the far



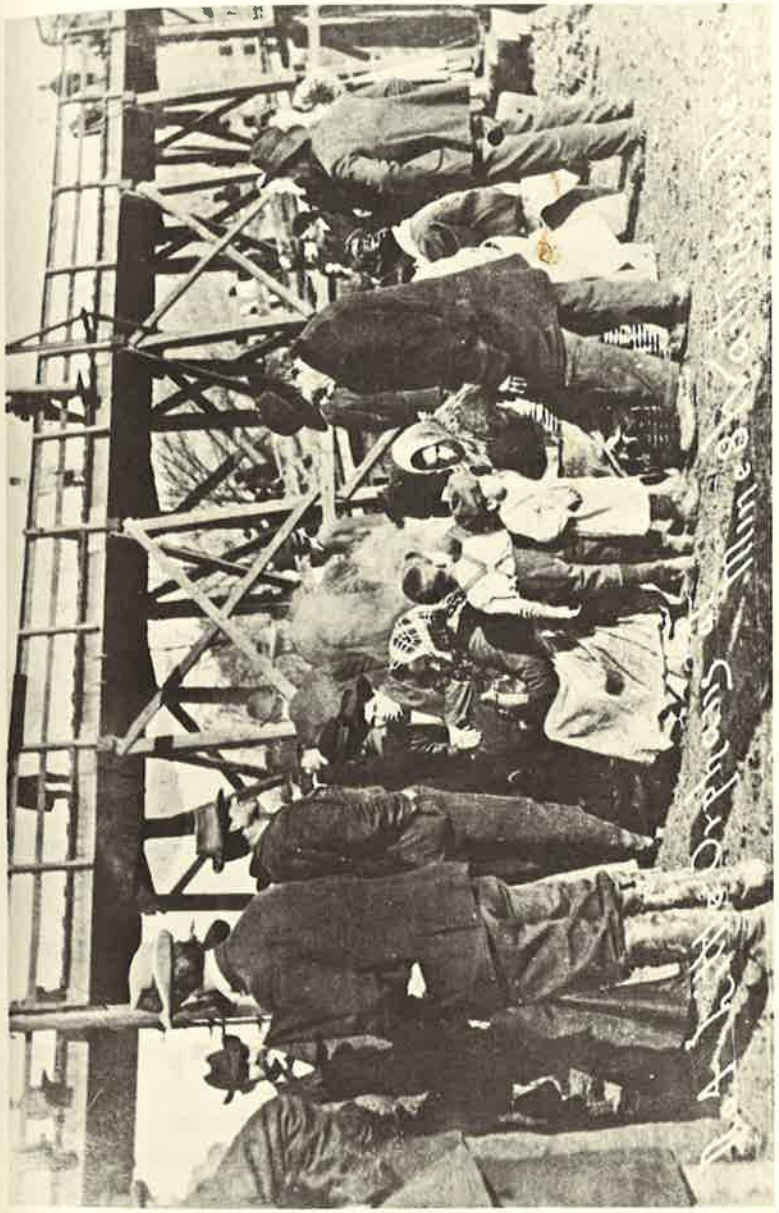
Looking toward mouth of No. 8 Mine across West Fork River, Monongah. (Courtesy of West Virginia Department of Archives and History.)

bank. The places where the buildings stood were left blank. It was difficult to tell where they once were located. Joe Newton, a workman on the outside, suffered a broken leg, and an engineer by the name of Bryce was killed near the entrance of No. 8. One report said that a child was killed on the hillside across the river. Some old-timers stated that this story is possibly from the fact that a trapper boy on the outside was killed.

In 1907, there were no organized and equipped rescue squads as came into use later. At Monongah, rescue and recovery of bodies depended on volunteers. Many experienced men from other mines rushed to the scene to aid and to see if there was possibly anyone left alive inside. Very little hope, however, was held that any miner could survive such a blast. The only way into the mines was through No. 6 opening which was intact despite the terrific flame and force emitting from it.

Women, children, and other relatives grouped as near as possible to the pit mouths hoping for a miracle. Some of the women had become stoically philosophical, showing much restraint, while others gave vent to their grief. Friday evening the rescue men came out stating that they had found four bodies, those who had been working close to the outside, or had been blown toward the mouth of the No. 6 Mine. They were: Fred Cooper, John Bateman, Lonnie Hindman, and William Sloan. By Monday morning about forty bodies had been recovered.

Mechanics worked frantically to restore air into the mines, and thirty-six hours after the blast, the fan in No. 8 was rolling and pushing air inside. Two other temporary fans had been put into action helping the rescue men to penetrate deeper into the wrecked workings. Crews went inside hanging brattice toward the main heading in No. 8. The men in No. 6 finally worked to the place where the broken tram had wrecked. On their way they found everything blown to



Monongah, December 1907. Relatives waiting word from those caught in the explosion. All inside perished. (Courtesy of West Virginia Department of Archives and History.)

splinters. The men began finding the dead horses and mules of which twenty-five had worked the No. 6 side of the mine. Barrels of quicklime were carried inside and poured over the stinking carcasses. About fourteen dead animals were found in the No. 8 also and quicklimed.

Following the explosion, the coal company employed a troop of doctors from Fairmont to report to Monongah. They stood around bonfires all night awaiting to administer to survivors. None ever came. They remained through Saturday and by that time it was known that the only big need for professionals was undertakers.

On the outside a morgue was set up in the rear of the First National Bank building across the river on the east bank. Every undertaker and assistant in Marion County were employed. Coffins by the carload were ordered from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Zanesville, Ohio. They were nothing more than plain rectangular wooden boxes with no inside lining. Additonal men were employed to tack cloth inside them to keep the body from the bare walls. Relatives of the dead, who objected to their kin being buried in a crude box, were honored with a casket for the body at company's expense.

By Tuesday night, 149 bodies had been recovered. A full crew of men were digging graves on the hillsides in Monongah.

It mystifies some thoughtful persons why the human is so curious to witness a catastrophe, to rush to see the horror. Television capitalizes on this trait of human nature. Why the excitement to see human blood, hear the cries and sobs of hurt humans? When the news reached Fairmont, Clarksburg, and towns along this interurban line, people dropped their work, if possible, jumped a streetcar and away to Monongah they went. Stories of all sorts were circulated. Stories such as you could see the blood flowing from the pit's mouth. People, mostly men, put on their best clothes as can be seen

by the pictures of so many spectators wearing suits or as termed in those days, "their Sunday best."

Sunday, two days later, when almost everyone was free from work, the streetcars were loaded with sightseers going to Monongah. Each trip going was loaded to the "cow-catchers." The town was overrun with curious spectators. When evening began to fall, everyone tried to leave at the same time and on the same car. A stampede resulted, but was alleviated when the car company put on extra cars. One conductor reported over 350 fares on that Sunday.

Since rescue work was done by volunteers and not organized teams, the coal company stationed a man at each pit entrance to escort every man who entered and in turn to check him as he came out. This was done in order to prevent someone being lost or overcome by blackdamp, etc., and in such a case, he could be rescued in time. A restaurant or canteen was set up at the pit entrances so that all working men could be fed thus enabling them to keep the rescue work going. The company paid for the food.

As soon as possible after the explosion, an appeal was sent out, first, to the people of West Virginia, and then to the nation, to come to the assistance of Monongah. Money, lots of it, was needed at once (in those days there was no compensation, no social security), as well as clothing, food, medicine, everything. It was winter and snow fell two days after the blast. The Fairmont Coal Company gave $17,500 while Andrew Carnegie of Pittsburgh sent $2,500. Other organizations and individuals all over the nation began to respond.

Over 250 women became widows and 1,000 children became fatherless. A survey indicated that sixty-four widows were pregnant. The company cancelled all debts for the widows and other dependents at the company store. Credit was then allowed for all of them. Those who lived in the company houses were notified that no house rent would be collected so long as they remained single.

Interurban coach taking sightseers from Fairmont to Monongah after the explosion.
(Courtesy of Clay Fullen, Monongah, West Virginia.)

By noon Monday, December 12, 297 bodies had been recovered. The temporary morgue was working overtime. As soon as a body could be prepared it was taken to the home of the victim to await funeral services, for burial quickly was necessary. Extra ministers of different faiths came in to assist. The Catholic priests were overworked and especially the Greek Orthodox since there were so many victims of this faith. The majority were buried in Monongah, but some were taken to their homes in other towns and communities.

Money began coming in at an amazing rate and organizations in Fairmont started the work of dispensing the aid. Newspapers of the time reported that no one went hungry or without the proper necessities of life.

On December 19, just six days before Christmas, Superintendent W. C. Watson announced that 338 bodies had been brought from the mine. The blast mangled and burnt some of them beyond recognition and some were never identified. Watson further declared that the mines had been explored throughout. (This announcement projected the idea that no more men than the 338 had been in the mine at the time of the blowup.) To that date, no list of the victims had been published. In the meantime, inquirers had been sent to every home in and around Monongah to ask if there was a family member missing. On the day after Christmas, Saturday, December 26, the Fairmont *Free Press* stated that 342 bodies had been recovered. From that date until some time in February, a body was occasionally found until the book was closed at 361.

To this day, everyone who had studied the facts of the disaster, everyone who remembers the catastrophe is positive that not all bodies were ever found. There were so many rockfalls and cave-ins that months would have been required to remove this debris. Furthermore, records of those in a mine in those days were a slipshod affair. Fathers took their sons in to help load coal and the boys' names were not on the

mine office roll. Contractors could hire men, put their names on the time book, and the company knew nothing about them. This is said and thought of about the Monongah disaster. Many foreigners, hired in those days, had no relatives, and no one cared much about them or their destiny. Today scores of them unidentified, lie in potter's field in an unmarked grave at Monongah. Many men came to the West Virginia mines to lose their identity. They wanted no one to know where they were, where they were from, or who they were. Many such men at Monongah lie in unmarked graves.

When the explosion first went up and news went out, nearly all papers reported 500 men and boys lost. The Raleigh *Herald,* December 12, 1907, headlined the above statement. An old-timer, still living, stated that one of the top bosses shortly after the blast said amidst his tears, "My God, there are 600 men in those mines."

Some human-interest stories always occur in times of tragedy. One pitiful case was when the corpse was brought home, seven days after the explosion, his widow gave birth to a child two hours later.

Three Morris brothers, Cecil, William, and Marion, were killed in the explosion leaving a ten-year-old sister. She was left an orphan, homeless without a living relative anywhere. Two of the brothers were unmarried and kept the home for her.

A Mrs. Davies, who lived on the west side of Monongah, which is on the highway side, lost her husband in the explosion and his body was never found. She went down the hill each day the mines ran after the explosion and got a burlap sack of coal from the mine cars, carried her burden home up the mountainside and deposited it near her house. She never burned a lump of it or allowed anyone else to do so. When asked why she piled this unused coal daily she stated that she had hopes of retrieving some of her lost husband's body. She was a young woman when the tragedy happened and she

lived to be an old lady. At her death a few years ago, her sons gave the coal to the churches of Monongah. The coal pile had grown to an enormous size.

Two Martikonis brothers and their father died together, but their bodies were not found until three weeks after the blast.

In the final count there were 250 widows and 1,000 orphaned children. The coal company gave each widow $150 and each dependent child $75. By the first of the year, January 1908, $200,000 had been donated to the dependents.

Staten Trader, now deceased, who was working at No. 6, but not on Friday at the time, told this story: He said, "Me and my brother Harold worked together loading coal. The evening before the explosion, I stepped on a nail sticking out of a board and run it in my foot. The next morning my foot was so durn sore, I couldn't work, so I didn't go to work. My poor brother went to work and he got killed."

Mr. Trader told this story also: "When all that money was sent in here from them big places like New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, they sent men along to give it out. About all them men was single and I tell you there was a lot of purty young widders left here after that explosion. You know what? Every durn one of them single men married them widders and stayed right here in West Virginia. Don't blame 'em."

Many of the widows were foreigners and unaccustomed to American ways. After the catastrophe, several of them were frustrated and wanted to return to their homelands. Money was given and arrangements made for them to go. Several widows were also in Europe when the mine blew.

One man, Fred Stubbs, was awakened by his wife early that fateful day. She was dreadfully sick from an upset stomach and began retching violently. He wanted to go to work but feared to leave her. Her sickness saved his life.

One boardinghouse in Monongah kept only miners. All of

them reported for work on that fateful Friday morning. None of them came to supper that evening, leaving seventeen empty chairs at the dining table. Their bodies lay somewhere under the mountain sprawled in total darkness, burned and mangled.

EPILOGUE

The Monongah No. 6 and No. 8 pits no longer produce coal. The companies took the wealth and moved to untapped seams. The entire mountain under the west side of the town is honeycombed and fallen in. If reports and speculations are true, bones of unfound victims lie under the town where life goes on in its usual way. The streetcar line quit in 1947, giving way to evertooting and polluting automobiles. U.S. Route 19 traverses the hill through the town on its way north or south, whichever way the traveler winds.

The cemeteries are there, some well kept with their stones inscribed with names of men who died that December day in "07." Also there is the potter's field with the unknown, not plowed under or left to the brambles as was "Little Egypt," at Havaco. The town is civic-minded with its schools and churches well supported by the people. The high school, in class A, occasionally produces a championship team. The star players get college scholarships.

In conclusion and prophecy, there will never be another mine catastrophe like Monongah. Government control and industrial know-how have risen above such possibilities. That "granddaddy of them all" is, we hope, a final page in coal mining history.

LIST OF VICTIMS

Compiled by Monongah Mines Relief Committee

Americans (74)

Carl Bice
William H. Bice
Henry Burk
Robert Charlton

Fred Cooper
Fay Cooper
William R. Cox
G. L. Davis
Thomas Donlin
Thomas Duffy
Harry Evans
William Evans
James Fletcher
Jahu Fluharty
Floyd Ford
Thomas Gannon
John W. Halm
John Herman
E. V. Herndon
Patrick Highland
Lon Hinerman
C. B. Honaker
John Jones
Sam Kelley
Patrick Kerns
Thomas Killeen
Patrick Loughney
L. D. Layne
Adam Layne
Timothy Lyden
Patrick McDonough
John T. McGraw
Charles McKain
Henry Martin
Scott Martin
Albert Miller
James W. Miller
James Moon
Frank Moon
L. L. Moore
Andy H. Morris
C. E. Morris
William Morris
Cecil Morris
Marion Morris
John H. Mort
Charles D. Mort
Sam Noland
Homer Pyles
Hugh Reese
John Regulski
David Riggins
John Ringer
T. O. Ringler
Fred Rogers
David V. Santee
Harry Seese
Beth Severe
Jesse Severe
Frank Shroyer
Dennis Sloan
Scott Sloan
F. E. Snodgrass
George Snodgrass
Michael Soles
Leslie Spragg
Will Stealey
Sam Thompson
Harold Trader
William Walls
J. A. Watkins
Milroy Watkins
George Willey
Charles D. Wise

Americans—Colored (11)

Charles Farmer
Richard Farmer
George Harris
Gilbert Joiner
Calvin Jonakin
Rippen McQueen
W. M. Perkins
John Preston
K. D. Ryalls
Jesse Watkins
Harry Young

Italians (171)

Carlo Abbate
Francesco Abbate
Giuseppe Abbate
Francesco Abbruzzino
Angelo Adducchio
Antonio Adducchio
Pasquale Adducchio
Domenico Pasquale Agostino
Biase Anciello
Celestino Anciello
Domenico Anciello
Paolo Anciello
Antonio Angiolillo
Angelo Bagnoli
Francesco Antonio Basile
Giovanni Basile
Salvatore Basile
Saverio Basile
Giuseppe Belcastro
Serafino Belcastro
Angelo Berardo
Celestino Berardo
Felice Berardo
Giancinto Berardo
Vincenzo Berardo
Antonio Bitonti
Rosario Bitonti
Giovanni Bonasso
Tommaso Borzonia
Adolfo Brandi
Vincenzo Cavallaro
Giovanni Ciambetiello
Liberato Ciambetiello
Nicola Ciambetiello
Domenico Cimino
Giuseppe Colarusso
Nicola Colaciello
Felice Colaneri
Andrea Colantuono
Francesco Colarusso
Giuseppe Colarsso
Felice Colasessano
Nicola Colitto
Antonio Conversi
Francesco Condino
Raffaele Cuoccio
Victor Davia
Antonio D'Alessandro
Giuseppe D'Alessandro

Pasquale D'Alessandro
Donato D'Amico
Michele D'Amico
Victor D'Andrea
Pasquale D'Elia
Giuseppe D'Uva
Michele D'Uva
Michele D'Onofrio
Pietro D'Onofrio
Antonio De Felice
Michele De Felice
Giuseppe De Maria
Sebastiano De Maria
Felice De Petris
Antonio De Prospero
Clemente Di Bartolomeo
Domenico Di Bartolomeo
Giovanni Di Jelsi
Giuseppe Di Marco
Umberto Di Marco
Angelo Di Maria
Michele Di Maria
Sebastiano Di Maria fu Michele
Luca Di Mario
Nicola Di Placito
Celestino Di Salvo
Domenico Di Salvo
Felice Di Salvo
Fiorangelo Di Salvo fu Pietro
Fiorangelo Di Salvo di Antonio
Gioacchino Di Salvo
Giuseppe Di Salvo di Fedele
Giuseppe Di Salvo di Antonio
Vincenzo Di Salvo
Vitale Di Saivo
Ruggero Di Sipio
Ventura Dosa
Armando Fallucco
Vincenzo Fasanelli
Giovanni Farese
Luigi Feola
Carmine Ferrara
Guiseppe Ferrara
Matteo Ferrara
Prospero Fiorentino
Antonio Foglio
Pietro Frateiacovo
Antonio Fratino
Giuseppe Fusaro
Francesco Gaetani
Antonio Gallo
Vincenzo Giacobini
Antonio Gioia
Pietro Gioia
Raffaele Girimonde
Francesco Guarascio
Domenico Guerra
Gennaro Janiero
Giuseppe Janiro
Pasquale La Vigna
Luigi Lelli
Giovambattista Leonetti
Carmine Lerose

Francesco Lerose
Giovanni Lombardi
Salvatore Lopez
Francesco Loria
Domenico Mainella
Antonio Manzo
Domenico Manzo
Leonardo Manzo
Michele Manzo
Giuseppe Marinetti
Salvatore Marra
Domenico Mascia
Felice Masella
Michele Mastropietro
Carlo Meffe
Francesco Meffe
Michele Meffe
Cosmo Meo
Pietro Morsella
Giovanni Oliverio
Antonio Olivito
Antonio Pasquale
Louis Patch
Basilio Pellillo
Giacinto Pellillo
Thomas Perri
Saverio Pignanelli
Nicola Pirrocco
Berardino Prioletta
Francesco Prioletto
Pasquale Prioletta
Pietro Prioletta
Pietro Provenzale
Carmine Prozzillo
Antonio Riccinto di Domenico
Antonio Riccinto di Nicola
Domenico Riccinto
Pasquale Riccinto
Antonio Rinaldi
Giuseppe Rinaldi
Raffaele Rinaldi
Michele Rizzo
Luigi Scalese
Giuseppe Serafini
Antonio Siletta
Francesco Todero
Gennaro Urso
Leonardo Veltri
Domenico Vendetta
Francesco Vendetta
Antonio Vergalito
Pasquale Vergalito
Francesco Yacones
Giovanni Yacones
Pasquale Yannacone
Francesco Zampino
Carmine Zeoli
Francesco Zeoli (Barone)
Sebastiano Zeoli (Barone)

Austrians (15)

Wojciech Bassaman
Thomas Drwal
Ignac Gach
Felix Gazda
John Hainer
Anton Hervatin
George Hrol
Stefan Noga
Frank Soja
Frank Swiatek
Jacob Trala
John Trusowicz
Anton Udovic
Stanislaus Urban
Johan Valencich

Hungarians (52)

Andrew Barany
George Barany
Michael Banyaczki
Joseph Begala
Michael Bilyo
Martin Bosner
Elek Busztin
Paul Cicvak
John Danko
Michael Danko
George Dankovcik
John Durectz
Michael Durkata
Michael Egri
Joseph Foltin
John Gemercsak
Michael Hamas
Wojcech Hanacsak
Marton Hanyik
Paul Hanyik
John Hornyak (Privracki)
Stefan Ignacsak
John Ihnat
Paul Jagos
Michael Kassic
Michael Kereszti
Josef Kovacs
John Kresko
John Kristoftz
Frank Loh
Frank Loma
Andreas Marczin
Michael Osval
John Palinkas
George Porhoncsak
John Rebics
Michael Sebak
George Sari
John Sari
Michael Sari
Stephen Sari
Andrew Stih, Sr.
Andrew Stih, Jr.
George Stofira
Joseph Toth
George Tomko

John Tomko
Paul Varga
Michael Vataha
Georgius Zachorcak, Sr.
Georgius Zachorcak, Jr.
Michael Zubko

Russians (31)

Mike Bolinski
George Cikas
Frank Dutko
Andrew Gerak
John Goff
Paul Goff
Walenty Kedziora
John Kowalike
Wadislaw Kowalsky
Frank Kreger
Franziscek Krul
Joseph Kviatkovski
Ignaty Lipinsky
John Luba
John Martikonis
Peter Martikonis
Thomas Martikonis
Marcel Miechotka
Vasily Mikitiuk
Carlo Mylkowski
Victor Niwinski
Felix Pierzgalski
Peter Rossa
Thomas Siykowski
Andy Smuzewski
John Smuzewski
Thomas Sosnowka
Joe Stahnlski
Michael Stempen
Thomas Adelbert Stempen
Thomas Zilnis

Turkish Subjects (5)

Andy Kiriazes
Nick Kiriazes
Coss Leventy
Nick Saltos
Nick Sousta

A list of 185 men who died in the No. 8 Mine, only, was given the *Joint Select Committee to Investigate the Cause of Mine Explosions* by the Fairmont Coal Company. Ninety-eight names on this roster are *not* on the list compiled by the Monongah Mines Relief Committee. This number plus the above list makes the casualty list reach 457.

No casualty list from the No. 6 Mine was given the State Committee.

Alesandra, Patsy
Augustine, Patsy
Attusi, Vantore
Ancello, Bacbiase
Avicello, Paola
Avicello, Colestino
Ancello, Dominic
Bartalma, Climenta
Bartalma, Dominic
Borze, Thomas
Bueshton, Alex
Berrarda, Phelix
Betonti, Ross
Benordi, Juste
Benordi, Jim
Barrarda, Jacinto
Cievak, Paul
Charlton, Robert
Cox, William R.
Collata, Nick
Conerga, Tony
Colarusso, Dominic
Colociello, Joseph
Colaruso, Joe
Colanero, Felix
Coceghi, Raeffela
Dankozcik, George
Dimario, Louvi
Dealesanto, Tony
Desalvo, Felix
Desalvo, Vincin
Deleal, Pasqueal
Deffleus, Tony
Deffleus, Mike
Dles, John
Demarco, Joe
Desalvo, Flora
Desalvo, Joe
Desalvo, Palestino
Desalvo, Angelio
Dun, Joseph
Dua, Mike
Frabiadola, Peter
Fellen, Armando
Goff, Paul
Garuk, Andy
Herndon, F. V.
Herlick, George
Halm, J. W.
Honaker, C. A., Jr.
Hiawatin, Anton
Inveor, Prospera
Ihnat, John
Jonakin, Calvin
Joiner, Golbert
Jacobin, Jim
Kiviatkowski, Josav
Kowalski, Wadislaw
Kinguris, George
Kinjuris, Mike
Kroll, George
Kovalic, Jno.
Karus, Jacob
Kasich, Mike
Kreger, Frank
Lore, Frank
Loma, Frank
Lombardo, John
Masch, D. C.
Miller, Charlie

Marcel, Michotka
Marionette, Joe
Mastrotietro, Mike
Matill, Bibratro
Mainelli, Dom
Novinsky, Victor
Porzillo, Frank
Pallella, Giagutto
Pallella, Basile
Priotella, Frank
Prelleto, Jno.
Ronoldo, J.
Rebich, Jno.
Rinaldo, Tony
Ross, Nick
Smaiska, Jno.
Stahnlski, Joe
Smith, Dominick
Severe, Jose
Smaiska, Jno., Jr.
Snodgrass, F. E.
Sarrafino, Jos.
Stampian, Thomas
Torrisa, Jno.
Tomko, Jno.
Tomko, George
Urban, Staney
Urovich, Anton

Chapter 13

Lick Branch, First

December 29, 1908

Christmas had just passed, the miners were working to catch up for all the money they had spent for the holiday. About 2:30 in the afternoon on Tuesday, December 29, 1908, the Lick Branch Mine at Switchback in McDowell County let go with a dust explosion that killed half a hundred men. The first indication of trouble in the mines was the earth rumble followed by a report or boom like the detonation of dynamite in the distance. Coal dust blew out three mine openings—one in the Smokey Hollow across the ridge and one across the Elkhorn Mountain on the Tug River side—and the main opening at Lick Branch which blackened the entire landscape. Immediately following, black smoke poured forth, and the town of Switchback near the head of the Elkhorn Fork of Tug knew that the mine had exploded.

At once, officials attempted to communicate with men inside the mine but with no success. Parties of miners started inside only to find that coal dust in suspension and smoke made it impossible to progress farther. The fan continued to run undamaged but brattices and air courses had been completely disrupted. Orders were issued to start bratticing and rescue of the blast-torn Lick Branch Mine was underway. By midnight, rescue men had brought out ten unhurt but frightened miners. Later that night, eight more were rescued, two of them, Joe Estes and J. H. Hurst, badly injured.

When the first announcement came out as to the number killed, the statement estimated about thirty-six. It was

evident the company did not have exact figures on the number who entered the mine, nor their names. Such was the case in all explosions in the early part of the century. Finally officials said that the casualty list would reach forty-five, then modified it to forty-seven. They stated that sixty-five men had entered the mine, and since eighteen had been found alive, the figure was correct. But when the mine was fully searched, fifty bodies came to light.

In the event of a mine explosion, props are blown down causing slate to fall in mountainous heaps. As one miner stated, "It falls to the huckleberry roots." Men were sometimes caught under this rock fall and possibly never found especially in days prior to a near perfect system of man check in and out.

All night following the explosion, hundreds of miners' lights could be seen going back and forth around the mountainside where the drift mouth was located. People standing in the valley watched the eerie twinkling movements of these lights and wondered what verdict their bearers might bring to them.

The survivors told that when the explosion went off and the flame did not reach them, they could hear the enormous slate falls setting in, jarring the earth about them. Then, they said that the air became so filled with "bug dust" they could not find their way. When rescuers found some of the dead, it was evident that they had become lost in the dust and smoke and suffocated, or died from blackdamp.

Before the bodies had been retrieved from the mine, some wives and children of the deceased went to the scrip office to see if there was sufficient work time or credit for them to buy food. Many were overdrawn leaving their families destitute.

Estimates were that as many as two thousand sightseers came to the scene. Many of them came to offer help while others visited, mainly to say that they had witnessed Tug

River's worst mine accident to date. Many onlookers were anxious relatives fearing but hoping for a miracle. One old man stood all night near the drift mouth awaiting news of his only son.

All the bodies were laid out in the machine shop, where identification was made, and then placed in the wooden coffins shipped in from Bluefield. Bereaved families could be heard over the coal town wailing and sometimes screaming. In some homes as many as three victims were brought to the house for their last rites. Such was the case of Jim, Joe, and Richard Lockhart, brothers, George and Aseny Parvolic, brothers, and Charles and Wiley Little, brothers.

When the dead were buried and quiet fell over the coal town, investigations began to filter evidence and conclude the cause or causes. At first, company officials and state inspectors stated that the cause would never be known, that the mine was faultless in all respects. No methane gas had ever been reported. Dust was to a minimum and kept wetted down, so they said.[1] James Ellwood Jones, general manager of the company, took the mine investigating committee of the state legislature, a committee formed to ascertain why so many mines were blowing up in West Virginia, to view and inspect his perfect colliery. A few days later it blew to kingdom come. One-half hour before the blast, chief mine foreman for the company, a Mr. Atkinson, inspected the mine and wrote it up as safe. Writers of the day lauded the company to high heavens for its diligence and perfection.

When the coroner's jury met to decide the cause, they claimed the "causes unknown to the jurors." They further stated that "no blame for the deaths can be attached to the Pocahontas Consolidated Collieries Company, or any officers of the said company."

1. Note that when the mine blew, men inside stifled of stirred up "bug dust," and the outside landscape became totally blackened with it.

VICTIMS OF LICK BRANCH

Alexander, Cleve
Anderson, Reed
Beatty, Samuel
Blevins, Elzy
Blevins, Thomas
Colin, David
Boresky, Gregory
Brown, John
Buschuke, Nicholay
Buschuke, Pinus
Calloway, James
Canaday, Pleas
Davis, Green
Edmondson, J. W.
Edmunds, Joe
Estes, Zeff
Harasmuk, Trofin
Hicks, John
Holland, Ab.
Holland, John A.
Howell, Thomas
Johnson, J. E.
Little, Charles
Little, Wiley
Lockhart, Jim
Lockhart, Joe
Lockhart, Richard
Meaket, George
Miller, John W.
Naumuk, Luna
Nizuk, Joe
Page, Scott
Palmara, Toney
Partin, John W.
Parvolic, Aseny
Parvolic, George
Poles, Peter
Reynolds, Walter
Roan, Jim
Rose, Dominick
Sanders, Kemp
Smith, Jim
Swain, Thomas
Tarrachuk, Karp
Weber, Tobe
Williams, Buck
Williams, Robert
Unidentified man No. 1
Webber, Mathew

Chapter 14

Second Lick Branch Explosion

January 12, 1909

The earth rumbled, trembled, and then gave out with a terrific, deafening blast. This incident was the reoccurring second explosion at Switchback, West Virginia, on January 12, 1909, at the big Lick Branch Mine. The men had just begun moving coal for the day when something set off the coal dust killing sixty-seven men.

When the people of the town felt the earth tremor, they rushed from their homes in horror and fear that tragedy had struck again. Two weeks before, the mine had blown up killing fifty men, and people were aware that it could happen again. Looking toward the mountain where the drift mouth was located, they saw dust and smoke pouring forth. This was evidence enough for them to know that it had blown up again.

Seconds before a tongue of flame had shot out the mouth followed by mine timbers, broken mine cars, common debris, and even a massive electric mine motor, used to haul a long train of coal, went hurtling over and down the mountainside. So much soot and coal dust belched from the mine mouths that the mountainsides were changed into a blackened hideous landscape.

As soon as the first effects of the explosion ceased, throngs of men rushed to the mine to aid in any type of rescue that could be organized quickly, to attempt to save any men who may have been working in rooms and not caught in the path of the blast.

A woman looking toward the main drift mouth saw a man come running to the outside. She screamed her observation to men preparing to enter the mine. Con Holladay and mine foreman Bowers, not being caught in the line of fire and concussion, started running toward daylight. Holladay collapsed a few yards inside, but Bowers reached safe air. Quickly the rescue men rushed inside to get the stricken man, got to within a hundred feet of him when the blackdamp drove them back. They failed to reach him in time.

The section of the mine wrecked in the first explosion two weeks previous was not in operation at the time of the second blast, but about twenty men were working at cleanup in the area. The section of the mine in which the second explosion happened had been inspected by both federal and state experts and by the so-called best mining men of the region, and everyone had declared the mine safe.

The Lick Branch Mine belonged to the Jones family and a son-in-law, I. T. Mann (the coal town of Itmann, also belonging to the same interests was so named by adding the initials to the cognomen of the son-in-law). The coal seam, six feet thick at Lick Branch, is part of the famed Pocahontas No. 3. The James Elwood Jones family bought the company from the first operators. When the second tragedy occurred, Mr. Jones, in his despair, said to a reporter of the Bluefield *Daily Telegraph,* "Morgan, I don't see why it happened here. God knows I have done everything I could for the men, and to have it happen a second time is terrible. This is the way all men must feel about the matter."

At first it was feared that the number of men killed would reach seventy-five and could go as high as eighty-five. When the mine foreman, who escaped death, made his statement, he estimated the number to be sixty-five. The number was actually sixty-seven. Sixty-six men had worked the day before and the estimate was supposed to be about the same.

After the December explosion, the company had in-

augurated a check system of tags (not as done at the present time), each label from the man being placed on a board outside as he entered the mine. The check room was situated just outside the entrance and in the path of the blast which picked up the building, tags, and all and cast them into the valley below. All were lost.

Today, it is state law that any miner who reports for work is issued a stainless steel tag the size of a silver dollar with his number and name thereon, and a duplicate is left in the lamp house on a tag board, and the building is not set where it can be blown away nor is it made of flammable material. The lack of these so-called "dog tags" caused a discrepancy in the death list. Many bodies were blown to bits and therefore never found nor counted, especially in the case of transients who had recently been hired and "batched" alone and had no previous address.

Another factor that possibly caused an error in statistics was the practice of the company contracting coal output to men who hired their own workers and kept their own individual records. In such an explosion as the Lick Branch, a contractor and all his men were killed plus his records of the day were on his person and possibly destroyed. When the news would break that a mine had blown up, in the early years of this century, no one seemed to know how many men were inside and the guessing began. Sometimes newsmen overestimated the number in order to have a spectacular story, and the company underestimated to protect themselves from too much criticism. At Lick Branch, a constant conflict of reports of the number killed was given out as each recovery party came out of the mine.

In all catastrophes there occur odd and unusual happenings, and the oddities make up interesting human interest stories. As in the case of the trapper boy[1] or young man of

1. As a rule, boys were used as trappers—a person to open a door for a trip of cars to pass, the door being used to control the airflow. There were no child labor laws in 1909.

seventeen who opened the door for a motor going to the outside. The boy quickly shut the door and jumped on the motor for a ride outside, knowing he could ride a returning motor and open the door on schedule. Just as he left the motor and was looking at the outside world, he saw smoke start from the drift mouth. He ran uphill a short distance and jumped behind a large stump. Immediately came debris, timbers, mine cars, electric wire, flame, and dust. His life had been spared by a boyish notion to get a free ride. He is credited as being the only person to see the explosion close up.

A story opposite to the trapper boy's luck was the case of a hunter who was passing the mine mouth on the Tug River side (Lick Branch had three openings) when the blast came to the outside, he was hit by a flying mine timber, killed instantly, and was carried down the mountainside.

Mine Foreman Bower was the only man inside to get out alive. He and Con Holladay were coming down an entry off the main haul way when the blast came, therefore, they were not caught in the concussion and fire. They began running and crawling for the outside which was not very far away. The blackdamp came up fast and Bower fell a time or two from air stagnation. He yelled for Holladay to come on fast but Con did not answer. Quickly, a rescue group went in to get Holladay but were forced back. Later when his body was recovered, it was found that he had fallen into a waterhole and drowned.

The Lick Branch Colliery had an opening on the Tug River side of the mountain, an opening in Turkey Gap Creek, nicknamed "Ole Smokey," and the main entrance on the Elkhorn side of the mountain. This was the drift that faced more nearly toward the coal town and railroad line. The most terrific blast came out of the Tug River and Elkhorn openings. One observer was appalled at the landscape minutes after the holocaust to see electric wires blown over the mountainside

hanging on tree limbs still burning and smoking. This scene gave much evidence of the explosion's force.

One well-known black man had a tatoo of a nude woman on his stomach. He was one of the victims whose face was burned beyond recognition; therefore, he was at first classified as unidentified. As relatives and friends tried to identify bodies it was stated that nine women identified the man. They exclaimed, "Why dat's ole tatoo." (A story told by a Bluefield *Daily Telegraph* report of the day.)

An old man came to the carpenter shop looking for his "Danny." Finally he recognized his son among the burned bodies. He broke down weeping, saying, "That's my Danny Boy.[2] What'll I do now? He was my only support." The old man was crippled.

The Lick Branch Colliery was located at Switchback, West Virginia, on the main line of the N&W Railroad, about halfway between Welch and Bluefield or about twenty-five miles from each center, in the very heart of the Pocahontas and Tug River coalfields. In 1909 several passenger trains between Cincinnati and Richmond stopped at the Switchback. When the news spread by newspaper to the outside world that a terrible calamity had occurred at Switchback, West Virginia, the imagination of the travelers was stirred. Many thought the explosion had obliterated the coal town, houses, stores, and everything. Such ideas prompted hundreds to disembark at Switchback to see the devastation, then catch the next train going his way.

Switchback found itself overrun by a couple thousand spectators for three or four days, who were hungry and cold since it was January and a cold rain had set in. The company store was the only source of food and it was soon depleted. Canteen and emergency centers had been set up for recovery and rescue men serving sandwiches and coffee, and wayfarers

2. In the list of victims the boy is Dan Arrington.

were not turned away, therefore, the town had a problem. The company store had a hot line to Welch and Bluefield where emergency orders were telephoned in and rail service began to unload extra amounts of food. Despite this, many curiosity seekers boarded their train and departed with an empty stomach.

Not only travelers from far away destinations stopped to see the horror, but short-trip riders from up and down the line grabbed every passenger train to and from Lick Branch and disembarked at Switchback. The more the people the more the excitement, and poor saddened Switchback had more than her share.

The Lick Branch Mine was badly wrecked inside and out from the terrific force that erupted within its bowels. Airways, stops, and brattices were torn out. Timbers or mine props flew out of place allowing the slate to fall everywhere. All this happened with a mine full of men. Only Mine Foreman Bowers survived. Then came the job of body recovery since there was none to rescue. The fan was not wrecked, fortunately, enabling workmen to start hanging brattice cloth at once. Some men advanced past the point of airflow, but the danger of asphyxiation or a new explosion was great. The company ordered two hundred safety lamps at once to eliminate the use of open lights by rescue men.

At first the company stated that possibly fifty men were inside at the time of the blast. Bowers, the bank boss, estimated sixty-five since sixty-six was on the company roll the previous day. On Thursday, January 14, after some bodies were recovered, the company made its first estimate that the number would be fifty-seven. Later the number was raised to sixty-three and reported to be final. However, as brattices allowed more air and permitted men to probe the entire mine, sixty-seven bodies were brought out and laid in the carpenter shop for identification, a difficult task since so many of them were mangled or badly burned or both. A

mortician and six helpers washed the corpses embalmed them at the shop and placed them in oblong boxes for burial. Onlookers and "rubbernecks" were not allowed inside unless for the purpose of identification. Many of them, however, found cracks in the building and viewed the horror of burned blackened bodies lying on the floor waiting to be prepared for the wooden boxes.

Scores of miners stood around gossiping, speculating, and advancing opinions. Many of them swore to bystanders that the number in the mine when it blew was as high as ninety. As in all explosions in early days, the actual casualty list could be in error due to the aforementioned man-checking system: to the contractor keeping his own record and to the family man who took his son or younger brother inside to help load coal and whose name was on no time book. Therefore, history of early mining will never know the exact casualties.

POSTSCRIPT

The town of Switchback has about as many souls today as in 1908 and 1909 when the mine blew up. But the mine is no more. The hillsides are grown up in brush and brambles where the mines once opened. James Elwood Jones, the coal baron of that era, has long since gone to eternity to join Con Holladay, Buck Williams, and the Little brothers who died in his employ.

Trains no longer stop at Switchback to unload express, passengers, and mail. The once majestic company store beside the track has become a derelict. However, U.S. Route 52 runs through the town. The houses are now privately owned and the men work in mines up and down the valley.

LICK BRANCH VICTIMS

Arrington, Dan
Abell, Albert
Ayers, James
Boldin, Luther
Bolen, J. Henry
Bowles, Henry
Bufflo, Floyd
Bufflo, Robert
Clark, Elk
Clark, S. C.
Cobbs, J. H.
Collins, Ed.
Dean, Lemuel
Durphey, Will
Enssey, George
Eversale, Walter
Giles, Walker
Hauge, Jno.
Hairston, Frank
Hairston, J. J.
Heppenstall, Peter
Holladay, Con
Howard, Charles
Hunter, John
Hunter, Mel
Hutcheson, Tobe
Johnson, Anthony
Jones, A. R.
Jones, Joe
Lee, Brown
Lee, Henry
Leonard, H. A.
Mahony, John
Mann, Bruce
Martin, Jim
Martin, Walter
McDade, A. P.
Mitchell, Clarence
Mitchell, John
Miller, A. R.
Miller, Dowdy
Myers, Thomas
Peters, George
Phillips, Charles
Phillips, Everett
Robinsky, Mike
Rose, Ed.
Smith, Jno.
Staples, Taylor
Surratt, David
Surratt, Riley
Terry, Ernest
Waller, Henry
Watson, Dan
Wyatt, Robert
Weilsord, Charles

Chapter 15

Elk Garden

April 24, 1911

Elk Garden lies in the northern part of West Virginia in the Eastern Panhandle and a long distance from the Elkhorn Mountain in southern West Virginia. This was the only major mine disaster to occur in that panhandle and the most eastern explosion in West Virginia at that. The coal town lies near Piedmont across Maryland's southern border and where the plateau merges into the mountain's pitched strata. The Ott No. 20 Mine belonged to the Davis Coal and Coke Company and was named for Ray Ott, superintendent and part owner.

The owners named the work headings instead of numbering them. Therefore, the explosion at Elk Garden happened in the Dean, Baldwin, and Atlantic headings. On Monday morning, the first workday of the week at 8:30, April 24, 1911, when spring was in the air, that carbon element, our necessary phenomenon, blew twenty-three humans to eternity.

It was spring with all the garlands of nature coming forth and love so essential to people was everywhere evident. Eighteen-year-old Lester Wilson kissed his sleepy sixteen-year-old bride of a few months, and happily marched to the mine to earn money for a better future. These were his last hours of happiness. His father, brother, and brother-in-law also died with him.

When the explosion occurred, men began preparing immediately to go inside to see if anyone survived. Mine foremen and other qualified miners rushed to the scene to aid in the

work of rescue. As in the case of all explosions of this sort, all air courses are wrecked, stops and brattices blown out, allowing the deadly gas to accumulate and remain. To push the gases out, the fan had to be in running order. Luckily, at Elk Garden the fan was not wrecked. Bedticking, a tough cloth, not much used in mattress-making today, was rushed to the scene in large bolts and long yardage. This ticking was hung in sheets inside the mine and nailed in conformity to the needed airflow.

Mine superintendents from other mines miles away, men usually with lots of know-how and leadership, came to the scene, some by special train. The rescue efforts and aid in general to the stricken mining town was blessed by the support of the railroads, especially Western Maryland and the B&O, who cleared tracks in all directions allowing special trains to bring in what was necessary. The federal rescue car from Pittsburgh made a record run to Elk Garden.

The mine mouth and area surrounding were roped off and law enforcement officers were put in charge to control the crowds. The relatives of the entombed men rushed, as always is the case, and without condemnation, out of their homes in frantic array running toward the mine. However, the newsmen of the day reported that these relatives kept their distance and were orderly, and some pathetically silent. The rescue force first came upon the body of Wilbur Shears, but several hours elapsed before the others were reached.

On Tuesday morning, twenty-four hours after the blast, fourteen bodies had been recovered, thirteen of them from the Dean heading and one from the Atlantic heading. Rescue men found the last nine bodies in the Baldwin heading making a total of twenty-three killed.

In some explosions the bodies must be carried out on stretchers all the way from the place of death to the outside as in cases of considerable destruction and slate falls in the main entries. But in the Elk Garden disaster, mine cars were

pushed near the headings where the bodies were loaded two to a car and brought out one car at a time by an electric motor. By nine o'clock Tuesday night the final body was brought outside. Horse-drawn wagons were obtained and the bodies were hauled to the undertaking establishments in Elk Garden. One undertaker was F. C. Rovin and the other was H. Wright. Coffins were rushed from Clarksburg Casket Company, who also sent men to assist in the embalming. Both parlors were instructed to embalm the bodies, place them in good caskets, and allow them to wait in the parlors for all friends and relatives to pay their respects. The parlors were to remain open throughout the night. Many of the corpses, showed burns, bruises, and lacerations about their faces, however, they seemed to be in a peaceful and silent sleep.

Thousands of spectators from all directions came into the town to see the results of the disaster and the people's reaction to such a gross tragedy. All funerals were set to be in Elk Garden on Thursday. A schedule was made for each funeral so that there would be no conflicts or overlapping at the various church denominations.

The Catholic Church conducted the initial service at seven o'clock Thursday morning for James Dempsey, Leo Dempsey, and James Brown. Throughout the day the sad and somber procession went on. As the shadows of evening came creeping silently and majestically to close the curtain on the day's sadness, Thomas Yost was given the last words of sanction and was then laid to rest.

All the miners were insured by the coal company for four thousand dollars payable to the proper beneficiary. The widows and dependents were given credit and charity at the company store. It was seen that none of them were in want. The company also paid all the funeral expenses. The total amounting to $2,160.60 for all twenty-three victims.

POSTSCRIPT

Today the Ott No. 20 Mine is worked out, the machinery and equipment gone. The town remains with its one main street with buildings mostly on one side only. The two funeral establishments have moved to more populated areas. Today, one of the buildings that housed the mortician's parlor is no longer somber and bizarre, but is lively and joyful as a beer parlor. An old-timer owns the place and remembers seeing the bodies lying on the floor on stretchers awaiting their turn to be prepared for burial.

LIST OF ELK GARDEN VICTIMS

Brown, James[1]
Buski, William
Dempsey, James
Dempsey, Leo
Hershberger, Ed.
Hetsell, William
Patton, Hawthorne
Pearson, William
Pritchard, Arthur
Pritchard, John
Pugh, Frank
Pugh, William
Runyan, Pemar
Shears, William
Tranum, Harry
White, "Geet," Jr.
White, John, Sr.
Wilson, Charles
Wilson, Frank
Wilson, John R.
Wilson, Lester
Wilson, Ray
Yost, Thomas

1. The first name on the list was buried first and the last man buried last. The writer was unable to find the relationship of the five Wilsons.

Chapter 16

Bottom Creek

November 18, 1911

Hardly two years had gone by since the two Lick Branch explosions on the Elkhorn tributary of the Tug River when the Bottom Creek Mine blew up on a Saturday morning, November 18, 1911, killing eighteen men. The mine is situated between Keystone and Welch and is also on the Elkhorn tributary, downstream seven miles from Switchback or Lick Branch.

The Bottom Creek Coal Company leased its coal from Crozier Land Company, which controlled many thousands of acres of coal land in McDowell and adjoining counties. The coal company paid the land company a specified royalty per ton for only the coal mined. The fee amounted to about ten cents per ton. This information leads to the facts of the Bottom Creek Mine explosion.

At regular intervals the Crozier Land Company sent a crew of civil engineers into Bottom Creek Mine to survey the mined out workings in order to determine the tonnage subject to royalty payments. The surveyors were to check also the methods used to be sure that the company did not mine the easiest way and leave coal that could never be reclaimed. There are today millions of tons of coal in abandoned mines that can never be mined due to the greed of operators and neglect of the department of natural resources.

On this fateful Saturday morning, engineers Henderson, Brewster, Williams, and Hervey went into Bottom Creek Mine to survey parts of entry 11. Miners were also working in

rooms of this entry. In other parts of the mine, one hundred fifty men were digging coal and timbering. Only seventeen men were working in No. 11 plus the four engineers who were some distance deeper into the mine, and about one and a half miles from the drift mouth entrance.

The fire boss claimed afterwards that he had made regular inspections of this section the week preceding. No doubt inspections of the rooms where the miners were working, off entry 11, had been made for gas that morning with a safety lamp. But in worked out rooms the fire boss did not make the morning run and mark off dangerous places. Since the engineers surveyed the worked out places to determine the amount of coal loaded, the fire boss was not required to inspect them before the engineer entered, which was a discrepancy in judgment and safety.

During the night a heavy slate fall had occurred in the old workings. It was speculated that this fall had caused an excessive accumulation of methane or marsh gas. This deadly chemical formula, mixed with sufficient oxygen, went off at a given time. Gas and dust never explode when men are not in the mines. Running machinery could set off a blast alone but it is unlikely. Two of the surveyors, Brewster and Hervey, went into room No. 7 to measure the space mined out. Both carried open lights. It seemed as if they were dice-shooting "seven come eleven" with the "Man in the Mask." Eleven came before seven and they lost in the game of life. Their bodies were found one across the other. The other two engineers a short distance away died quickly. In the rooms off No. 11, fifteen other men were caught also. They knew what had happened since the rush of air knocked out their lights. One Antonio Talcott stated that they could not get the lights to burn again and started to run for the diagonal of No. 11. He told that men dropped all around him, but he put his hat over his nose and mouth and kept going. Slate was falling everywhere, but only a small piece hit him on the head. He

heard a man or two groan lying motionless as he ran past them. Some time later this strong man emerged into daylight safely. A Bluefield *Daily Telegraph* reporter wrote that Antonio "bore a charmed life." Other experienced mining men said that his escape was remarkable.

Four other men, who were in section 11 but not close enough to the blast to be seriously injured, made their way to the outside. One hundred and fifty men were working in other sections of the mine and did not know that an explosion had occurred until rescue men came in to tell them and clear the mine of workers. This blast unlike Lick Branch and Coaldale, was not of terrific force. Not many of the men inside had been burned, but several had been crushed by falling slate, possibly after they had fallen from the effects of afterdamp.

All bodies were recovered the night following the tragedy. One Russian was mutilated past recognition, and one other man was missing, not known whether he had left the mine or was under a slate fall.

Antonio Talcott was the hero of the explosion by his fantastic escape, which he dramatized more and more as he retold the story.

The four engineers were: W. H. Henderson of Philadelphia, E. H. Hervey of Maryland, Charles Brewster, and Arvin Williams. All others were local men.

MINERS KILLED

Amola, Gregor
Archuchik, Steve
Brutcher, Guy
Campbell, Dan
Coles, Frank — Brothers
Coles, Martin — Brothers
Holoabacha, Fran
Hubbard, Harry — Brothers
Hubbard, R. C. — Brothers
Moore, Burt
Ondick, Phillip
Valenka, Phillip
Wenco, Joe
One Russian, unidentified

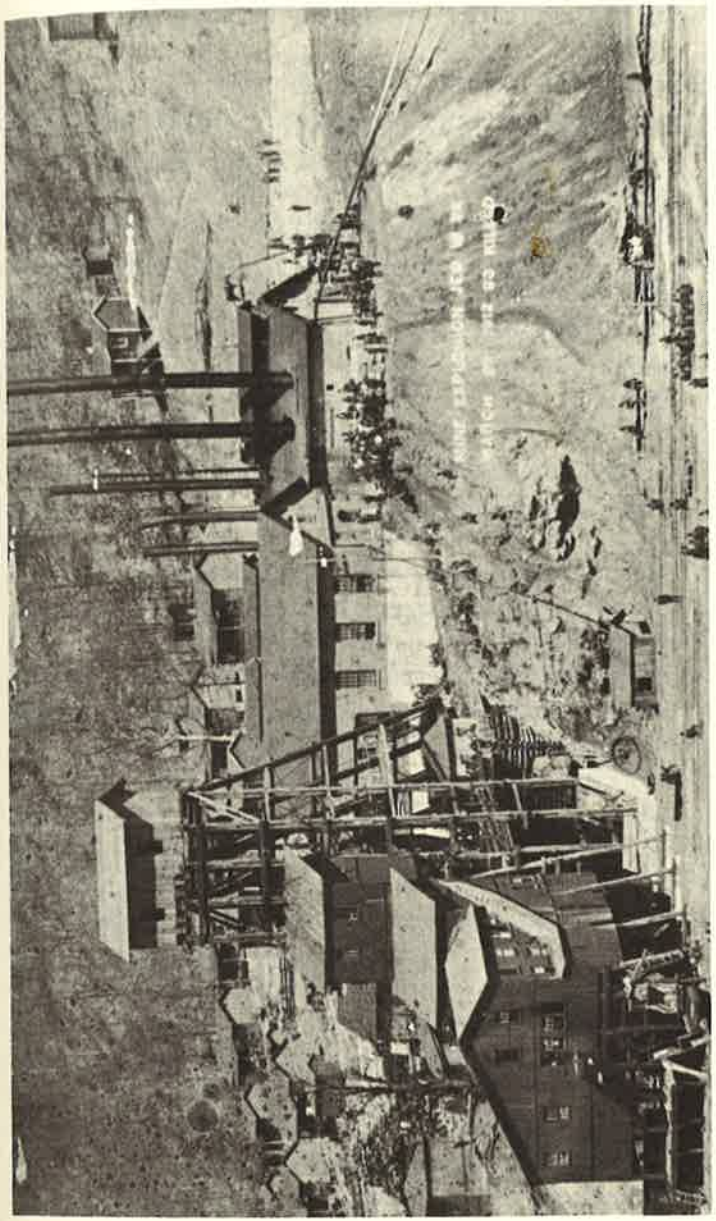
Chapter 17

Jed

March 26, 1912

At Jed, a mining town two miles above Welch, some of the miners' families were on the verge of hunger. The Norfolk and Western could not furnish the mine enough railroad cars to keep the mine running as much as two days a week, sometimes only one day. Wages were poor and food was higher than usual at the company store. The mine worked on Monday, March 25, and the whistle blew in the evening indicating that there was work for the next day. The people were happy since this meant two days and maybe more this week.

The Monday night crew of twenty-five men, including the fire boss, went into the mine, a shaft two hundred and eighty feet below the ground level of Tug River. This night crew cut coal with a new and modern electric machine that cut a groove above and below the coal so that the coal could be safely shot down for loading. At this time most miners cut the groove with a pick. The night fire boss made his rounds into all the working places, tested the top for loose slate, and checked for any accumulation of methane gas. On this pre-daylight tour, he found all working places safe and free of methane gas. Upon leaving the mine he marked the board at the outside entrance "OK" indicating that the day shift could enter the mine. Twenty-five men left the mine and one hundred entered for the day's work. Three fire bosses among them proceeded to go to each machine cut and shoot the place, that is put the dynamite in, dobie the hole with clay—no other materials permitted—and detonate the charge with



Scenes at Jed—now Havaco—on day of explosion, March 26, 1912.
Notice coffins stacked against building in right center.

an electric battery, a modern and safe method indeed for the time.

On this Tuesday morning, March 26, 1912, the work in the mine proceeded as usual. One hour and fifteen minutes passed when an open light—all miners at Jed used them—ignited some gas in a working place which in turn set off the always prevalent "bug dust" and another mine tragedy was written on the record, "eighty-three killed, many by asphyxiation, but mostly by flame."

A trapper boy, not far from the bottom, was the first person found after the rescue team got inside. He was breathing but burned badly. He had attempted to run for the shaft bottom but had encountered afterdamp. They brought him to the outside as quickly as possible but he soon died. He had lived one hour after the blast.

The blast was not terrific like those of Stuart and Lick Branch, but enough to take a heavy toll, in fact, the largest casualty list ever suffered in the immediate Tug River valley coalfields to that date and still remains one of the worst. (Bartley on Dry Fork of Tug killed more in 1941.) The worst damage to the mine was the blowing out of props or timbers and allowing slate to fall. The Jed Mine had about one foot to sixteen inches of slate above the coal.

A mining engineer described the report of the explosion as he saw it from the outside. He said that a gust of smoke gushed through the head frame like a head of steam blowing off through a huge pipe, and it lasted a minute. Coal was being hoisted at the very instant, the cage being on its way to the top which went on its way into the dump on the other side. (Two cages dumped coal; one on the right and one on the left.) The mine foreman, J. H. Henry, was on the bottom from where he telephoned to unload the left cage and send it back immediately. His orders were okayed and ten men who were working near the bottom came out of the shaft unhurt. Shortly afterwards, three men came out through the old

airway unhurt. They luckily were not too close to the concussion and had avoided the blackdamp, or afterdamp.

State mine inspectors from nearby mines were on hand about two hours after the blast. These men helped to lead the rescue workers inside to see if there was any chance of survivors. William Lecky, the mining company manager, was in Williamson, but he caught a coal train coming up Tug River and reached Jed by four o'clock that afternoon. Colonel O'Toole, general superintendent over all the U.S. Steel Corporation mines, was soon on hand. Many expert mining men from other collieries soon arrived. By four o'clock Tuesday afternoon, the first real organization of rescue workers entered the mine. The previous crews who tried to reach the workings were driven back by afterdamp, smoke, and heat. The No. 7 Mine rescue car was rushing in with modern oxygen helmets.

The first crews took bratticing and started the work of trying to get air into the damaged area. The fan had not been damaged by the explosion force, but a blade had loosened which caused some delay until repairs were made. Afterwards, with the fan going, air went into the mine at the normal rate, but slate falls had torn out the brattice work short-circuiting the air to the far headings. Crews of men with the will, nerve, and know-how worked frantically and in shifts to clear the slate, hang brattice cloth and try to reach the men, hoping to find some of them alive.

The first corpses brought out two days later on Thursday had begun to decompose. Coffins were already on hand with undertakers to prepare them for burial. There was no embalming and very little cleaning could be done. Some were reclothed and placed in the wood boxes or coffins. On the hillside below the shaft on the opposite side of the valley, a crew of men were busy digging graves. As soon as a man was identified and coffined, he was taken to "Little Egypt" and interred with very little ceremony if his family did not take

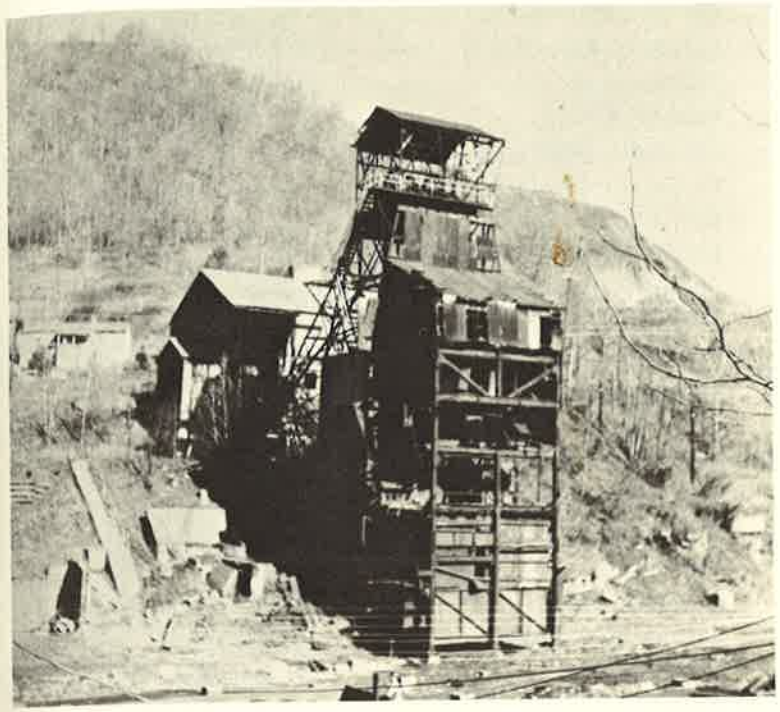
him elsewhere. Many of them were foreigners without relatives and had few friends. Some were imported and no one knew anything about them. Few cared. Finally on Friday, the last bodies, eighty-one in all, were brought out and quickly buried. (To this day old-time residents say that two were never found. Bodies not found are not counted.)

The management of the Jed Coal and Coke Company did a noble act in behalf of the wives, children, and other dependents of the victims. These people were destitute to begin with, that is living "hand to mouth" when the tragedy struck. The commissary of the company was ordered to give food and clothing gratis to all dependents who qualified and allowed them some time for adjustment to a new cycle. One-third of the victims were married and lived in the coal company houses.

Today, if you ask about the graveyard where they were so hastily buried, you'll be told that it's not possible to find any graves. Recently a relative of one of the unfortunates came to Havaco (the new name given to the town after the explosion) asking how he might find his kin's grave. He did not, nor will he ever find the miner's tomb.

The graves were never tended to, and the identification tags fell off the markers—if there was ever any put there—from the stakes driven into the ground as a headpiece. Summer came and went and vegetation grew all around. For a time, only the clay showed where the graves were, and then the brush and brambles, which grow so profusely in the moist mountain climate, obliterated the last evidences of a graveyard. In a few short years, a thicket of trees and undergrowth made the place a hillside jungle.

A row of company houses sits on the hillside just below the potter's field. Time and nature had finally eliminated the last marks of "Little Egypt." The people living nearby needed garden space. They cut the saplings, the briers, the so-called trash, and burned it above the bones of the unfortu-



The abandoned Jed-Havaco shaft that gave up its dead in 1912 and again in 1946 by explosions.

nates. Some hapless Ukranian or a Muscovite from the steepes of Russia, or a Sicilian lies now below a potato patch, or a Big Boy tomato vine.

VICTIMS

Agash, John
Agnew, Merco
Agnew, Sol
Borotz, Joe
Caparal, Guiseppe
Chandler, Charles
Chandler, Jack
Denton, Willie
Dombroski, Alex
Flex, Emilio
Flex, Dettino
Flex, Rinaldo
Fleshman, John
Fuigley, John

George, Andrew
Gillispie, Robert
Gilman, Lee
Gilmer, I. C.
Gosgashi, Mike
Goyla, Frank, father of
Goyla, Mike
Greley, John
Guidolotti, Mario
Guydluck, Mike
Hampton, Sam
Harendo, Tony
Harris, Henry
Harris, William
Haynes, James
Helton, William F.
Hill, Frank
Howard, Steve
Jefferson, Samuel
Johnson, Ed.
Kissavich, Alex
Lash, Valley
Leeper, James
Matee, Paul
Martin, Sterling
McClure, Ed.
McClure, John
Mimsick, Adam
Molnar, Frank
Moto, John
Moto, Steve
Papp, Kalman
Parsons, James
Patt, Mike J.
Pecos, Bruno
Pennington, R. E.
Perri, Domineck
Petta, Mateo
Rice, Frank
Ross, Joe
Sabo, Alex
Sammy, John
Sanders, Thomas J.
Sarvoliski, Peter
Sowalski, Peter
Selida, Berta
Ski, Sam
Smith, George
Solaski, Alex
Sovanni, Goivanni
Spagnoula, Carmelo
Spagnoula, Francisco
Steele, Victor
Stid, Nick
Swabie, Ted
Syntor, Mike
Szatmaria, Steve
Tarantello, Alex
Terryall, Wilson
Terry, Emmett
Williams, Mike
Woodward, W. J.
Yaskoney, Steve
Zavechy, Andre

The McDowell County Death Register did not list the complete roll of eighty-one names of the bodies removed from

the mine. Other sources supplied names, the total exceeding the number found. Some of the preceding names were printed by newspapers and many conflicts appeared. The list below contains names left over but possibly should be on the official roster while some of the preceding should not be there.

Additional names: Paul Bodos, William Bell, James Cipory, Bruno Chrilicosta, Steve Sosnowski, Charles and Frank Spaniard, Joe Burraze, and Valley Tosh (in death register), probably confused with Valley Lash, also in the register.

Chapter 18

First Eccles

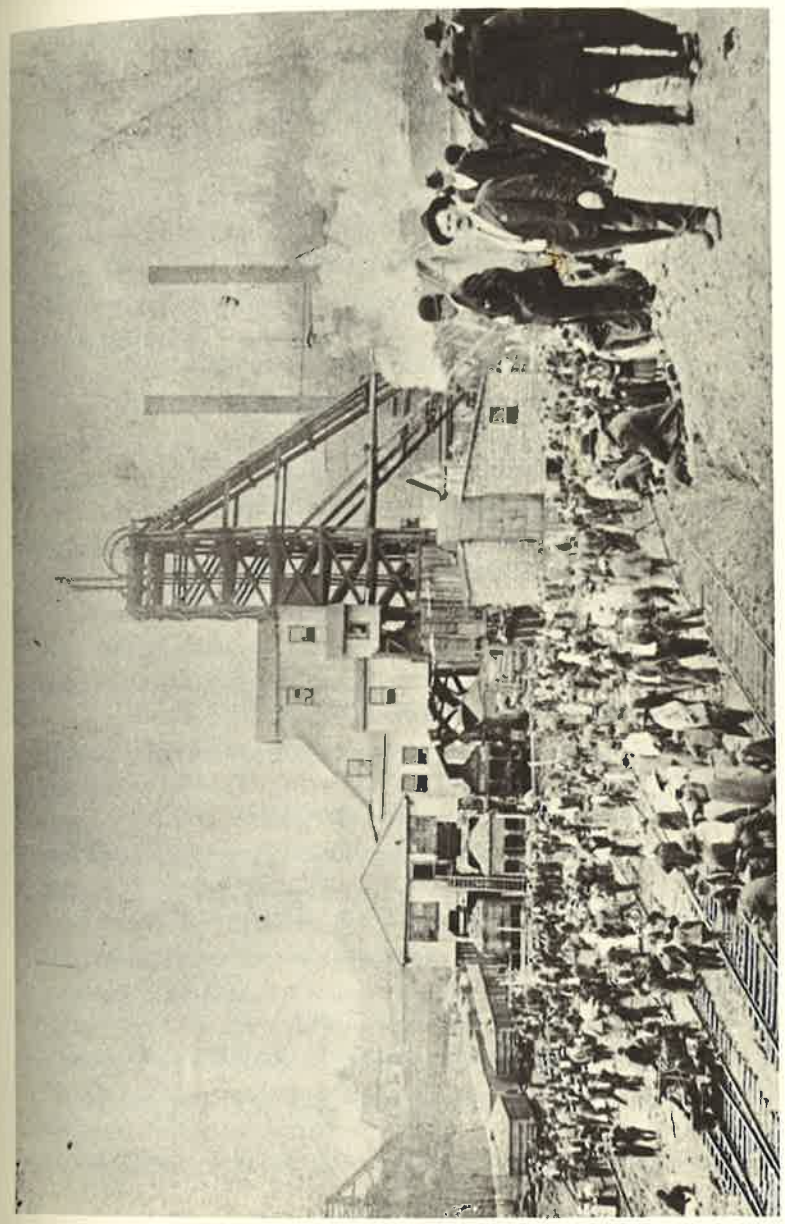
April 28, 1914

A time to die . . . a time to weep . . . a time to mourn. . . .
Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3

The name Eccles came from the first six letters of the twenty-first book of the Old Testament, Ecclesiastes. The town was built and named Eccles when shafts were sunk into the two coal seams back in 1891 by the Guggenheim family of New York City. On April 28, 1914, at 2:30 in the afternoon the No. 5 Mine let go with a horrendous explosion that shook buildings in Beckley four miles away. One hundred eighty-three men died. Some reports are that the total was 190, but only 183 bodies were found in the second biggest mine tragedy of the state of West Virginia.

A bitter winter had just passed and April rains had brought out the flowers and vegetation. Dogwood and service trees decorated the hillsides and the mountains with white blossoms and all seemed right with the world. Tuesday came bright and pretty and payday always gave the miners and their families a new lease on life. Salesmen flocked to bigger coal towns to sell their specialties, which were not available at the company store. On this payday, Freeman Linville was at Eccles to sell the workingmen life and accident policies, and Linville was a "go-getter." Eccles was the biggest payroll on the Virginian and C&O railroads, the latter having a branch line from Beckley to Lester.

No. 5 Mine dropped 500 feet vertically into the Beckley



No. 5 shaft at Eccles on day of 1914 explosion. (Courtesy of Mrs. Buster Daniels, Fairdale, West Virginia.)

seam. No. 6 Mine, only 250 feet down, was a shaft into the Sewell seam. The two were connected in a way that the air shaft to No. 5 passed through No. 6 carrying the deadly blackdamp that killed nine men. No. 6 did not blow up, and sixty-four men came out alive.

When the mine exploded, the first indication was a growling rumbling noise that made everyone hesitate for a few seconds and then came fear and reality of what had happened. But the mine let them know with sure evidence a few instants later when came the real explosion. The dust had ignited from the gas explosion and nearly blew the mines inside out. To describe the outside discharge is beyond the imagination. At the shaft mouth out came everything such as parts of humans, mine cars, mine timbers, bits of metal, rocks, and pieces of mules. One man walking toward the shaft stated, "When that force came out of that shaft, I was about seventy-five yards away and everything started falling around me. I ran for my life and that's all that saved me."

Chris Brooks, worked at Eccles, but it being spring, he asked off to put out his crop as it was corn planting time and he owned a rolling farm on the mountain a mile from the shaft. On that sunny afternoon, his two sons just old enough to help him farm were with him. He stated that he heard the rumble and felt the earth tremble. "I quickly said to my son nearby, 'Listen, I believe that is Eccles blowing up. If it blows to the face, it will blow back and we'll really hear it.' Hardly had I finished when the ground shook and the report was like a cannon's roar. I knew that moment, a lot of men had died."

Mr. Brooks, an experienced miner, went on to say that the mine went off from a gas explosion which blew to the face, that is, into the workings away from the shaft bottom, thereby stirring up the fine flour-like coal particles or "bug dust" into suspension. There was just the right amount of oxygen to support the combustion. When the flame hit the face it

blew back, picking up momentum as it came to the outside. Only an atomic bomb could have had more impetus.

On the outside everyone was horrified; women rushed from the houses that clustered not far from the mines. They realized at once what had happened. Some left babies in their cribs alone while others dragged little ones screaming to the scene. A black spiral of smoke rose from the shaft, spiraling high enough to be seen in Beckley. The people of that city knew that Eccles had blown up.

The Virginian Railway had a station operator at Harper in sight of the mine and one at the Eccles railroad station. These operators went into service immediately to let the outside world know that Eccles, a community of 1,500 people, needed help—lots of help. Since there were no medias of information such as television and radio to reach everyone, the telegraph was the first good source. The first telegraph messages to Charleston, Beckley, and Bluefield newspapers stated that 272 men were entombed and thought to be dead in the two mines. The first issues of the dailies reported that all the men were thought to be lost.

The first attempt to descend into the mine found the shafts wrecked until no cages could descend. The No. 5 hoisting shaft literally pushed its entire workings, such as cage guides, timbers, waterline, and all, outside. The air shaft to No. 6 and on down into No. 5 was the only hope to reach the men, dead or alive. But a peculiar and unheard of incident happened. John Joshus,[1] working in No. 6 Mine, was among the first to arrive at the portal in No. 6 to find the cage fouled. He grabbed the cable and hand over hand climbed the 250 feet to the top. His escape alerted others that there were live men in the No. 6 waiting to be rescued. All No. 6 men were outside by six o'clock that evening but no cage had gotten on down to No. 5.

1. Joshus died in the Layland explosion eleven months later.

Crowds from everywhere rolled into Eccles, some on foot, most of them by train, and others by wagons and horseback. Law and order was enacted and the mine area roped off. Governor Henry D. Hatfield commandeered a special train and brought State Chief of Mines Earl Henry and other officials from Charleston, arriving in Eccles by nightfall. To get from Beckley, the county seat and the largest town east of Charleston and west of Bluefield, to Eccles, people boarded the C&O branch line from Beckley to Metalton, the station nearest Eccles, then walked the two miles to the scene.

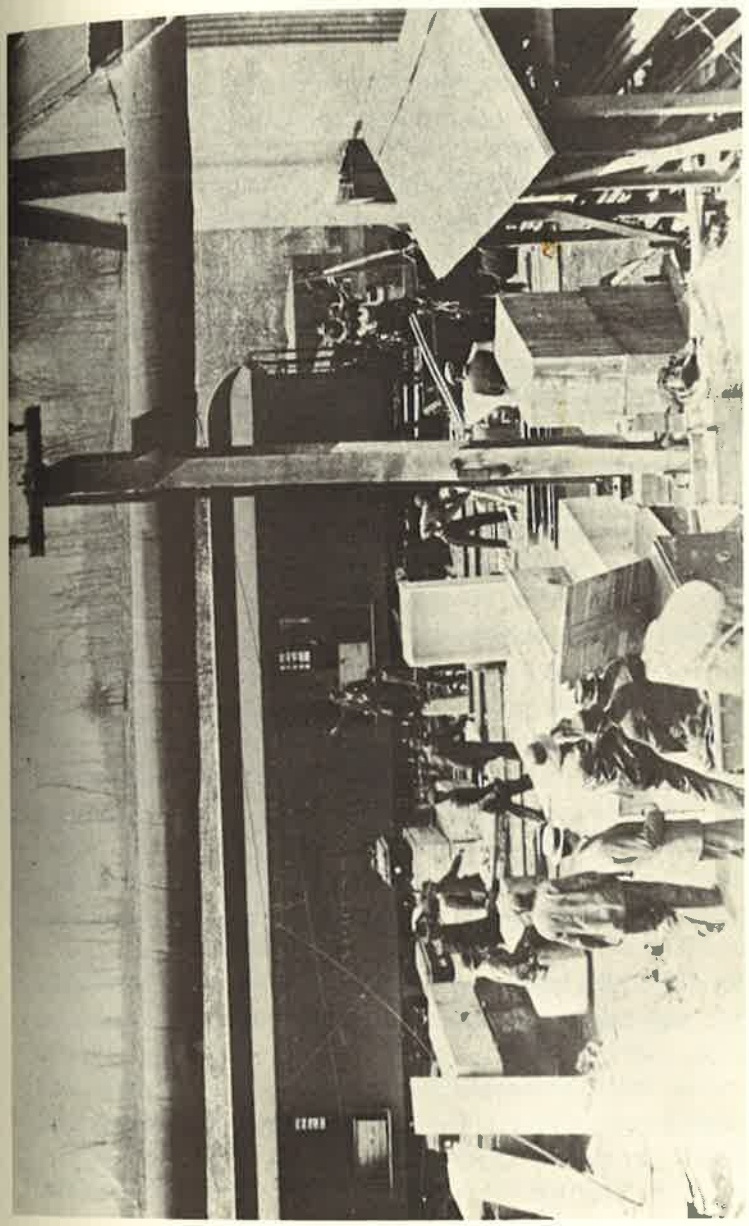
Food supplies in the stores ran out, as they did at Lick Branch in 1909, since sightseers bought and ate everything edible. Business boomed in the face of tragedy.

Three full days passed before men could get into No. 5. Such large amounts of debris had blown up into the shaft clogging its passages that a ladder system had to be built the remaining 250 feet from the Sewell level into the Beckley seam or No. 5. The sump was full of loaded mine cars, mules, water, and debris in general. Finally the guides were repaired enough for a cage to go down to the No. 5 level, but the bottom of the cage could not go into the sump far enough to allow exit from the cage. Governor Hatfield, who was among the first to go down, reported that on his descent he had to crawl through a three-foot opening from the cage to get to the mine floor.

On the fourth day, the rescue men found their first bodies. Not far from the bottom, one of the rescue men said, "I'll be durned fellers, if here ain't the little insurance man."[2]

Freeman Linville, who got permission from the company to go into the mine to sell insurance, was the first body found. In his pockets were several applications he had solicited that fateful day. His body was shipped to his home in Charleston at 79 Ohio Avenue. He is the only non-working

2. This story told to the writer by a rescue man in the crew.



Coffins being prepared for shipment of victims of Eccles Mine explosion April 28, 1914. Black casket in left center is supposed to have been the one containing the remains of Freeman Linville, insurance representative. Body being sent to Colorado for interment. Linville lived in Charleston, West Virginia.

miner known to die in a West Virginia mine explosion. A wife and one child survived him.

When rescue men reached the bottom of No. 5, they found almost undescribable conditions. Everything was torn up; timbers out, slate falls, and mine cars, some loaded and blown down main haul ways toward the shaft bottom. One of the most nauseating encounters was the number of dead mules blown into piles at the very cage landing, already swollen and stinking. Some of them were mutilated with parts of their bodies scattered about. A few days later, people on the outside could smell the terrible stench of the rotting animals at the shaft bottom. Men were too busy hunting for human bodies to remove the carnage.

All systems in the mine were destroyed, including waterlines, and in a shaft mine, pumps are an absolute necessity. A deep mine such as Eccles far below creek bed level catches an enormous flow from water seams between the strata. In this case, the pumps were destroyed allowing water to collect especially in the lower levels. When recovery men searched for bodies, they probed every water hole. The corpses as a rule were found submerged in the black water mixed with coal and slate and in some cases under the slate fall. Bodies that were in drier levels were swollen; had turned black, and a few days afterwards putrefied. The task of removing them was terrible. Many had swollen until their clothes were bursting. In some cases, those found submerged in water were not decayed or swollen badly, but were preserved by the cool water.

All of the 183 bodies were not recovered until the middle of May, slightly over a half month later. Two morticians from Beckley, a Mr. Rose and a Mr. Calfee, set up a morgue in the washhouse. Several carloads of coffins were shipped in. All the bodies were washed, if they were not too decayed, and embalmed. A suit of clothes costing ten dollars with white shirt and tie was placed on each one. A coffin costing fifty

dollars enclosed his remains, and if relatives did not specify differently, he was buried in a graveyard not too far from the mine. A grave digging detail was kept busy until all bodies were interred.

The stable boss at the Mabscott Mine four miles away felt the jar and heard the rumble when the explosion went off. He ran to his boss stating that Eccles had blown up and he was going there immediately. The foreman replied, "I haven't heard anything about an explosion. How do you know?"

"I heard the roar and felt the earth quiver, and I know."

"The Guggenheims can take care of their own business and you can stay here and take care of your job."

Mr. James said, "I raised that Weatherford boy, taught him how to take care of mine animals, and I know he is in that mine and I am going to see about him. He's the same to me as one of my own sons."

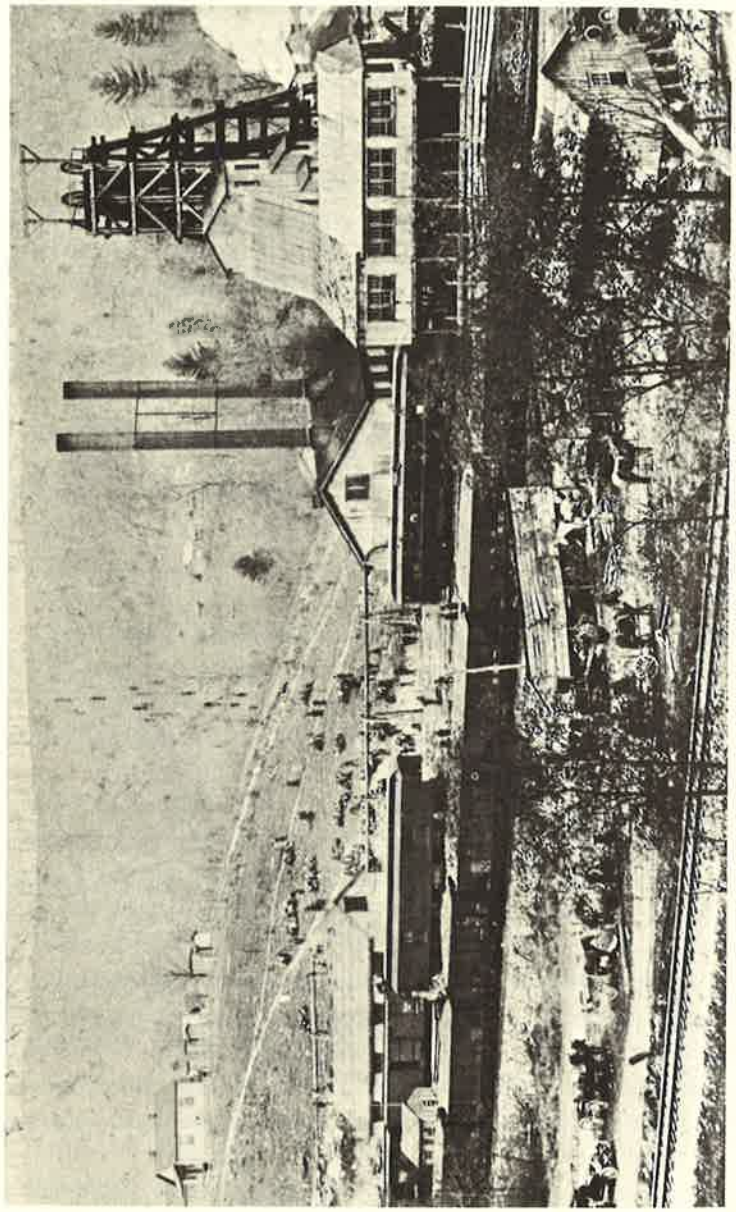
"If you go, you need not come back to work here. Your job will be filled by another man."

"To hell with the job, I'm going to see about that boy."

Mr. James rushed to let his wife know and then walked across the mountains taking a "near-cut" to Eccles. On his arrival, he learned that no hope was left and that the boy was inside the blast-torn mine.

Ten days passed and his wife got no message from him. She boarded the C&O "jerkwater" at Mabscott, rode to Surveyor, changed to the Virginian, and got off at the Eccles station. On inquiry about where to find her husband, she was told that he was helping the morticians. At the bathhouse she asked if he was there. He heard her voice, rose up from where he was sleeping, and she fainted. He, being overworked and tired out, had gone to sleep in a damaged coffin. To see him rise from the dead was too much for Mrs. James.

The Weatherford boy was stable boss at the shaft bottom. He went in early, got the mules fed and ready. One of the regular drivers did not report for work that morning and the



No. 5 shaft at Eccles following the explosion of April 28, 1914. (Courtesy of Mrs. Buster Daniels, Fairdale, West Virginia.)

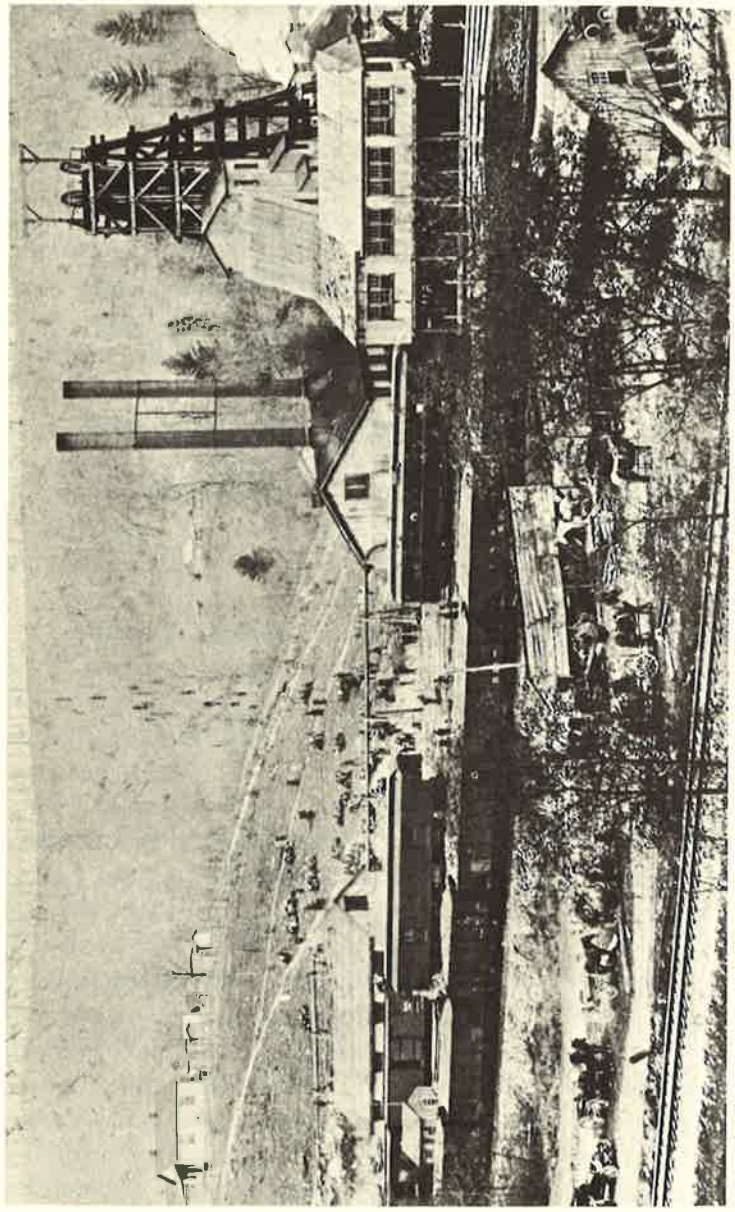
mine boss asked him to drive a mule that day and get extra pay. He did and died in the blast, otherwise he would have come outside and lived. His body was one of the last to be found since it was submerged in a water hole and well preserved. On reaching the air, it discolored at once.

One seventeen-year-old, Hobart Clay, went to a Sparks' Circus in Beckley the night before. He stayed out too late to get up and go to work, thereby saving his life.

The question arises: What blew up that mine? From coroner's jury findings and all evidence presented, there seems to be little doubt as to the cause. Of course, ignited gas setting off dust caused the fire. But why the gas accumulation. It seems that a contractor, Seth Combs, wanted to move a big ponderous, slow moving Jefferies cutting machine from one side of a coal barrier to the other side where he was to cut and load out another boundary of coal. To move the machine down the entry to the end of the barrier and back up the other side was a half mile and over a half day's time. To cut through the barrier was only an hour or so. It happened that the barrier was the main air course into the workings and any break through would short-circuit or stop the airflow.

It was told later that Combs asked the mine foreman if he could cut through the barrier. The mine foreman told Combs not to attempt such a move until the foreman supervised the work by hanging brattice to keep the air moving; otherwise, to move the machine around the end and up the other side. Old-timers tell the story further that Combs waited until the foreman went to the outside for lunch, then had his men shoot the coal and load it out to his profit. Combs's body was found on the side where he wanted the machine moved, and his men died nearby.

At the coroner's hearing, poor Seth Combs was blamed for everything and the jury absolved the company by saying that, "the short circuit of air was caused by a contractor without



No. 5 shaft at Eccles following the explosion of April 28, 1914. (Courtesy of Mrs. Buster Daniels, Fairdale, West Virginia.)

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the consent or knowledge of any of the operating staff and that the company was in no way to be blamed for the disaster."

John Liggins, so the story goes, contracted the job of moving or disposing of the fifty-seven mules rotting in the mine after the human bodies were removed. He agreed to dispose of them at fifty dollars per mule, and an additional one gallon of moonshine whiskey daily to settle his and his men's stomachs after such a stinking day's work. The company granted his request, so the old-timers say.

Some of the mules, those close to the shaft bottom, were hoisted to the outside, hauled away, and burned. Those deeper in the mine were dragged into one large room and sealed off, where they are to this day.

The wife of a mine foreman told in later years that she did not see her husband for two weeks while recovery men searched for bodies. The day he came home—they lived in the coal camp—he yelled to her to get washtubs, put them in an outbuilding, and fill them with hot water. He would not get near the house or her since he had the strong odor of dead humans on him too strongly for an ordinary sense to bear. She stated that for days, no matter how much bathing he did, he still bore the obnoxious odor.

The news reached other coal towns quickly by telegraph. Slab Fork, about ten miles away, got the news quickly. A boy and girl, pre-teen youngsters, ran to the mine stable and asked that a couple of fast horses he saddled. The girl was a Caperton and her family owned the Slab Fork Mine. The stable boss trotted out two good ones and away they went by way of Jenny Gap, Lester, Surveyor, and Eccles to see the excitement which caused them to forget the time, and soon night fell. The two had to hunt their way back home after dark to anxious awaiting parents. Both got a sound beating on the backside.[3]

3. The Caperton girl has since married and lives in Florida. The boy, now a retired man, lives in Mabscott, near Beckley.

A woman, on giving up hope that her husband would ever be found alive at all, went ahead and remarried after about seven days of waiting. On the twelfth day they recovered his body. Both wife and the new husband buried him in style and with honors. She stood on one side of the grave and the new husband on the other during the ceremony and interment.

Grave marker of miner who died in Eccles explosion, April 28, 1914, Catholic Cemetery, Beckley, West Virginia.

The morticians and helpers ripped and cut the mine clothes from the dead bodies—in some cases they had been burned off—placed the clothes in boxes furnished by the company, in case a relative or someone wanted them. The boxes were hauled to one of the company buildings and stored where they were soon forgotten. Years later an official of the company found them and ordered them taken to the trash dump and burned. A boy nosing around happened to pick up one pair of the overalls and found a gold pocket watch. He stated later, "Everyone of us pounced on those old

dirty clothes and out poured coins, watches, pocketknives, and the usual items men carry in work clothes.

"The watch started ticking when I wound it. I kept it for years and then traded it off."

VICTIMS OF ECCLES EXPLOSION

No. 5 Victims

Abbott, A. A.
Adams, John
Adam, J. E.
Akers, Boyd
Akers, W. A.
Bailey, M. R.
Bobbitt, Alf
Bordonorish, Sam
Brown, Judge
Bulash, Andis
Bzota, Simon
Cadle, C.
Cadle, E.
Cadle, James
Campbell, Tony
Casu, John
Cinchow, Stanley
Clayborn, L. C.
Cohen, James P.
Colbert, Ernest
Combs, Lee
Combs, Seth M.
Copras, Joe
Cottle, Leslie
Crook, J. J.
Cucia, John
Daldo, Dominick
Dark, William
Dennis, Ed.
Derosie, Joe
Doyley, W. W.
Dudley, Green
Edwards, E.
Ellison, E. O.
English, D. C.
Epsi, Micheri
Farcento, John
Fari, Joe
Fela, Charles
Fortunyo, Joe
Fowler, Rowland
Frencho, Joe
Friedley, T. C.
Frost, W. J.
Galimore, Will
Gatono, Rossie
Genidor, John
Gevick, Wich
Giovani, Daren
Golden, Pat
Goras, Petro
Gray, H. E.
Green, Emmett
Groney, John
Gurko, Jack
Gusaky, William

Habit, A.
Haiston, Jesse
Hale, Jake
Hardman, A. H.
Hayslett, O. D.
Hockman, Joseph
Hirman, Mike
Inovich, Mike
Jamando, John
Johnson, Ed.
Johnson, Edjar
Johnson, William
Jones, George
Jordon, Marshal
Jordon, James
Joseph, Mike
Juff, J. H.
King, George
Khrasher, S.
Korum, Alex
Kramer, Robert
Kreptsky, Frank
Kreshaka, John
Kulmen, Andrew
Lester, J. A.
Levikix, Joe
Lisect, Wayman
Lopp, Alex
Majamode, Pete
Matlock, William
Mauko, Tony
McClough, Thomas
McMillian, George
McMillian, Henry
McMillian, Lacy
McMillian, Neeley
Meadows, Charles
Menosky, Mike
Michele, Casu
Mick, John
Miller, B.
Minosky, Stanley
Mischuk, Fred
Mollinoci, Sodordio
Moran, C. D.
Murphey, G. B.
Musial, Frank
Nickeri, Mike
Norman, Pete
Novitsky, Mike
Olah, John
Orso, Tony
Osodich, Henry
Osodoh, Pete
Palmer, John
Panny, Steve
Park, Joe
Perkins, Richard
Petro, Daldo
Phillips, Garland
Poff, J. H.
Polnay, John
Poteet, Robert
Predno, Mike
Price, J. T.
Prosup, Joe
Protpee, John
Qusenberry, W. J.
Randall, Ed.
Richmond, William

Roach, Hobart
Roak, S. F.
Robinson, Ed.
Rose, Paoli
Ross, Wallie
Rushak, Pete
Salrorta, Goiani
Sellers, J.T.
Scott, John
Shelton, N.
Shipruk, John
Shubonash, Anthony
Simas, Charles
Smith, J. T.
Smith, Wiley
Smith, William
Somice, John
Stanislavs, Tony
Stanley, Harvey
Stepp, Barney
Stonkovich, Joe
Tabor, Norma
Tanner, C. A.
Taylor, C. J.
Tedys, Frank
Thrasher, S.
Thrasher, West
Thompson, Robert
Tibbs, Charles
Toler, Norman
Turner, J. H.
Tuska, Joe
Tuska, Sed
Valenchi, John
Washington, George
Wayman, Lester
Weatherford, E. G.
Webb, Clarence
Webb, Danna
White, Phillip
White, Sam
Wiseman, E. A.
Wiseman, Walter
Woods, Newt
Woods, Wess
Wright, Eugene
Younger, Dossie
Zantile, Parti

No. 6 Victims

Davidson, John
England, S. L., mine boss in No. 6
Goodman, L. L.
Harper, Joe
Miller, Frank
Miller, Joe
Robbins, A. W.
Waldron, Carl

Freeman Linville
(an insurance man, was not a working miner)

SURVIVORS OF NO. 6

Addes, Edmond
Asura, John
Baalick, Frank
Bartin, Brook

Bennet, John
Biggs, L. C.
Blankenship, A. H.
Brodie, James
Brooks, Gus
Broughman, A. W.
Buchanan, Dave
Burdiss, Harper
Casasky, Jim
Churnwold, Herman
Cisock, John
Cole, Fred
Cole, G. F.
Cole, George
Copeland, Joe
Derenge, William[4]
Dickey, William
Doss, Walter
Drosto, Mike
Dulsko, Anthony
Erdman, Arton
Fill, George
Filler, Frank
Filler, Joe
Goodman, L. L.
Goodwich, Nick
Gromwold, Albert
Hadra, Frank
Hall, C. C.
Harder, Pete
Harper, Joe
Hughes, Thomas
Joshus, John
Johnson, Joe
Jolubick, John
Jones, Dan
Kawalczyk, John
Kliefeld, Ewold
Koalman, Bob
Lawrence, William
Lee, C. E.
Lingerman, F. J.
Makviak, Stanley
Martin, C.
Matulvevich, Bill
McCormich, Ed.
Mikelwsky, Frank
Muzimic, Mike
Nostick, William
Phillips, E. L.
Phipps, George
Redd, Judge
Rogers, A. D.
Ryan, J. S.
Salada, Frank
Salawa, Joe
Sams, J. W.
Senvch, Dan
Shephard, C. A.
Swdora, George
Teddys, Andy
Tomcip, John
Tonich, A.
Warden, Carl
Webb, Dane
Watson, Alex
Young, Jerry
Zielencko, Joe

4. Hero of Layland rescue in 1915.

Chapter 19

Carlisle

February 6, 1915

February 6, 1915, one month before the tragic explosion at Layland which claimed 114 lives on Laurel Creek, a blast went up in the Carlisle shaft mine near Oak Hill, taking twenty-two lives. The explosion was due to gas which the company claimed was hardly existent in the mine. However, the fire bosses had reported that their safety lamps had been showing a fair amount in the No. 5 heading and No. 11 entry. The mine was a 450-foot vertical shaft in the famed Sewell seam not too many miles from Summerlee shaft (old Parral) and the Lochgelly shaft (old Stuart), both with tragic histories of disasters.

Carlisle was a well-kept and well-ventilated mine with a hoisting shaft and an air shaft in compliance with the state law. Fire bosses made their regular runs each morning before the men entered the mine. On this tragic Tuesday morning, the fire bosses came out and marked "OK" on the board outside. The mine was all in order and safe inside. Nevertheless, they had detected gas in No. 5 heading and had made some sort of marking on the board to indicate danger. At the work whistle, about 225 men were lowered to their regular workings. Less than two hours of working time had passed when the open lights set off a gas explosion in No. 5 heading. Two men died instantly, nineteen others died from afterdamp, and one man was rescued badly hurt with a skull fracture. He died four days later in the McKindree Hospital on New River.

The explosion was not violent and not much damage was done to the mine. Two hundred miners were brought to safety shortly after the blast. The bodies were all recovered on the day of the explosion.

When the coroner's jury sat for the verdict on the explosion, the company was exonerated from being at fault, but the fire bosses who marked the workings safe were blamed for their neglect of duty. No charges were brought against them, however.

The public was not so kind; the two men were dubbed as practically murderers of twenty-two men.

Romello and Raleigh Capri, brothers, who made the fire boss run that morning, claimed that they warned the men verbally that gas had been detected in room No. 11; they further stated that they put "danger" boards across the entry to the room.

Two bodies were found entering No. 5 heading and approaching room 11 showing that they had not entered the forbidden room 11, but the body of one man was found alone in room 11. How he came to be there is a mystery since that was not his room, and he was supposed to be in another part of the mine. The question is yet unanswered. All investigations showed that it was a gas explosion started by an open light such as all mines used at that time. No shooting could have been done so early in the morning. The majority of the men were killed by afterdamp from entry No. 5.

All bodies were recovered by nightfall. Funerals were held on Monday and most of the victims were buried in a local cemetery.

VICTIMS

Chandler, Remus
Comiski, Victor
Comski, William
Custer, Jack
Erstine, Frank
Garten, Andy
Gray, William
Johnson, Lindsay

Kerbert, Charles
Kopinski, Albert
Maikers, John
Ora, James
Panneli, Fred
Rex, Ollis
Saboles, Joe
Scarbo, Dayle
Smith, Frank
Sonnenberg, Mike
Sollivay, Fred
Sounders, Jack
Thomas, Montague
Vitivich, Leo

Chapter 20

Layland

March 2, 1915

Near the head of Laurel Creek on the Babcock Plateau of Gauley Mountain lies the once thriving coal town of Layland on the north side of the New River Canyon. At the upper end of the coal camp sits a white church at the base of the mountain. This sanctuary hides an ugly scar from one's view, a place that was once a drift mouth to the Layland No. 3 Mine. Inside this mountain orifice, 119 men died from a terrific coal-dust explosion (official count lists only 112), on a Tuesday morning, March 2, 1915.

On that March morning, when the men went into the mine, one was a young man starting his first shift at this place. It was hardly daylight since men were to be at the working place by 7:00 A.M., and this required starting early if the miner had to walk a long distance inside to the face of the coal. This young man was William Derenge, who just eleven months before had escaped death in No. 6 Eccles when No. 5 blew up killing all inside and nine men in No. 6 close by where Bill worked.

Bill caught a motor ride to the No. 10 left where he had been assigned to work loading coal. He found his working place and his buddy, Earl Aurents; the two immediately "hit it off." Bill started his pick, cutting on one side of the rib and Earl on the other. Then something happened. The air became compressed and the men felt as though they were being crushed. Then Derenge, from experience, realized that the mine had exploded. It was between 7:15 A.M. and 7:30 A.M.

Another very young man, in fact a boy of seventeen, went to work that morning with his older brother. They were accustomed to this mine and worked together. The boy was Howard Huggart who lived with his widowed mother in Layland. His brother, Sam, had been married a little over a year and had a six weeks old baby daughter. The brothers were also working in No. 10 left when the blast came.

Howard Huggart, one of forty-five survivors rescued from mine after Layland blast of March 2, 1915. Mr. Huggart, the boy survivor, was seventeen years old at the time. He lives at Stanaford and is one of the two living men who experienced the Layland horror.

As soon as the men realized they were in trouble, the older miners began planning. The men from the main heading came running down to meet the men from No. 10 left. They started to try to see if they could get out but only a short dis-

tance down the main entry they came upon a wrecked motor with the operator dead at his controls. A little farther on they ran into carbon monoxide and had to retreat. Back to No. 10 left, an entry off main, they set to work to barricade themselves in.

Why do miners build barricades after an explosion? Not to ward off the force in case of another blast, but to conserve the good air and keep the deadly blackdamp out. And this blackdamp has killed hundreds of men after an explosion and did kill several in this explosion. The evidence is easily detected if a man died by the fire or by the aftermath.

Joe Caldwell, a seasoned miner and highly religious man, and William Derenge became the leaders of those entombed men. The other men followed well and did not panic. A barricade was first built with a torn down trapdoor and steadied with slate; then deeper into the entry a thicker and heavier barricade was built of slate and mud.

All lights were put out to conserve oxygen. One or two were allowed to be lit occasionally, but some of the men insisted on too much light. Mr. Derenge said, "We managed to steal their lights and hide them." All lights were the carbide type and struck by flint.

There were forty-two of these men in all, without any food, since most of them ran from the working places without their dinner pails. There was hardly any water, and the temperature was the natural earth temperature of fifty-one degrees. Mr. Derenge stated his worst discomfort was being continuously cold.

There were five men in No. 9 left, just below 10 left from where the forty-two were barricaded. These five men did the same as the others: barricaded themselves off. Neither group was aware of the other; however, they were not too far apart, nine being nearer the main entrance.

Those in 10 left made a count after they had settled themselves to find there were forty-two. If they had counted

earlier they would have found forty-four, but they did not miss the other two until rescue.

Mr. Huggart told the story that these two foreigners could hardly speak a word of English and stayed to themselves talking in their own language. When all the men attempted to walk out and ran into blackdamp and then retreated, they did not miss the two foreigners not being among them. On the day of the rescue, March 6, Mr. Huggart said, "We found them dead by the tracks where they had attempted to leave by their own decision."

Bill Derenge stated that the morning he entered the mine he noticed that the motor stirred up the dust until there was no visibility at all behind them. Even a strong light could not penetrate it.

Howard Huggart, the other living survivor at this writing, then the seventeen-year-old boy, said that as the men walked to their places in single file, five deep, the tail man could get lost easily in the dust, the visibility being zero.

There was a rumor told that the night foreman the evening prior to the blast said, "This dust is going to blow this mine up."

When it blew that March morning, it went down the 3rd main entry like a discharge from a twelve-gauge shotgun. The mine entrance, a beautiful stone arch built by skillful Italian masons, was blown completely away, some of the stones landing on the hillside across the valley. Debris of all types found in a mine came out like grapeshot from a cannon's mouth. A young man, A. B. Cooper, pushing a cart, and his dog tagging behind him were killed instantly some seventy-five yards outside the drift mouth. (The mine bored into the mountain horizontally on an equal elevation with the valley.) With the artistic facade blown away, the earth caved in and practically closed the entry to the mine. Soon after the blast, rescue crews were organized and went inside. Fortunately,

the fan was not greatly damaged and fresh air began flowing into the mine again.

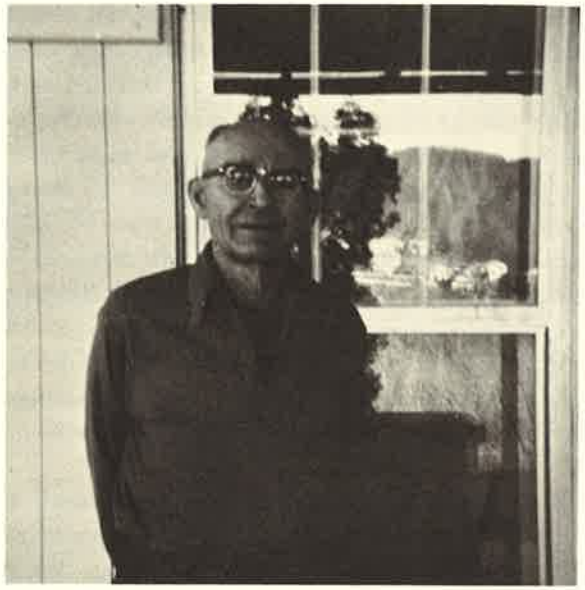
When a mine blast occurs, the section hit has its air courses disrupted. Regardless of the fan's efficiency, the air does not reach the needed places since stops and brattices are torn away not allowing air to follow a direct path into the far reaches of the mine and return by another pattern. Any breakdown of the system short-circuits the air, causing gas to accumulate or men to die from afterdamp following the fire. Such was the case at Layland when all the bodies had been recovered.

Seven men working off the main entry were rescued after the blast. One of them, "Big Mike," a powerful man physically, carried two unconscious men overcome by blackdamp, one under each arm, a long distance. He was compelled to leave one of them, a John Miller, but carried the other one to safety. Then he started to retrack his way to get Miller, but the rescue men and officials would not let him reenter the mine. The rescue men could go instead. After waiting and making preparations, they entered the mine only to find Miller dead.

By Friday night all the bodies had been found that were caught in the area of the blast. However, approximately fifty men were still missing. They were given up for dead but rescue forces were on hand and searching. They did not know that forty-seven men, five men were barricaded on 9 left and forty-two in 10 left near the main heading a mile from the place of the explosion, were still alive. An error on the part of the rescue car crew from Pittsburgh nearly cost these men their lives. This crew, "made up from the sons of officials and politicians," as one survivor stated, wearing oxygen helmets and all the other latest equipment, explored the main heading on March 3 to return and report that the forty-seven were lost. They stated that the mine had fallen in at all points

where men could be. They had seen the slate barricades and thought they were cave-ins!

A miracle did save the forty-two in 10 left. It happened on the second day, Wednesday, when these men decided to try their way out. Only one was to go without a light—for fear of igniting more dust or gas—and to carry a message. Toney



William "Bill" Derenge, one of the two living heroes of the Layland explosion of March 2, 1915. Mr. Derenge was instrumental in aiding the forty-one other men in their survival on no food or water for five days before rescue.

Jenony, an Italian, agreed to go. He was to carry a pick handle and tap the trolley wire at intervals so that the vibrations would carry back to them and to let them know that he was still in good air. If he stopped tapping, they were to go after him. A hole was made in the barricade and Toney

crawled through carrying a note written by Bill Derenge on "shootin paper" telling rescuers to look in No. 10 left.

Toney forgot to tap but yelled out instead "all'a good—still'a good." Then Toney stopped yelling. The men listened only to hear a flopping, thudding sound. Bill Derenge and his buddy crawled out and went down the entry to find Toney inert. They quickly grabbed his heels and ran backward to get out of the blackdamp. Toney's head was bumping the ties, hard enough to kill him, so they stopped and reversed him. Once inside he began to revive and was finally well again.

On Saturday morning nearly five days after the tragedy the five men in 9 left decided to try it to the outside. They tore out the barricades and started down in the main entry when one of them spied a piece of brown paper. He read Bill Derenge's message, lost by Toney on Wednesday. When the five men staggered out of the mine on Saturday morning, pandemonium broke loose in Layland. Rapidly, the news spread that forty-two other survivors were barricaded a mile inside. Immediately, the rescue crew assembled and went the mile up the main heading, tore down the barricade to find forty-two starved and thirsty, but happy men.

The main mine mouth had been cleared enough to get mine cars inside. When news spread that men were still alive inside, a mule team was assembled and hooked to mine cars to haul out these survivors. This cavalcade met the survivors walking and the rescue men carrying seventy-five year old Tom Whalen. His son John was among the rescued.

Howard Huggart, the seventeen-year-old boy, told the story in his later years, that when the mules reached daylight, sun shining brightly, the driver whipped them into a brisk trot and the survivors came out of that death hole in a surge of glory. A temporary hospital with doctors and nurses had been set up below the company store about a half a mile below the mine. Howard said as he went by in his happiness he saw his mother who waved to him. At the hospital they

were given soup only and told to wait awhile before other substance was administered.

But the Italians had a different notion. Their friends had heard the good news and were there with wine. They all drank and shouted and offered everyone "vino" to celebrate a victory over death.

On Saturday morning while in the mine, Bill Derenge had a dream or vision that a woman in white led him into the mine. He could see the entrance demolished with dirt and mud sliding across the drift mouth. When he awoke, he was bothered about a woman entering the mine in his dream since miners were superstitious of females being inside a coal mine. Bill felt that this was a sign, a foreboding. He found a piece of "shootin paper" and a pencil and wrote his will. He was ready to consign himself to his Master. Within an hour, rescue men tore down the barricade and carried them to safety.

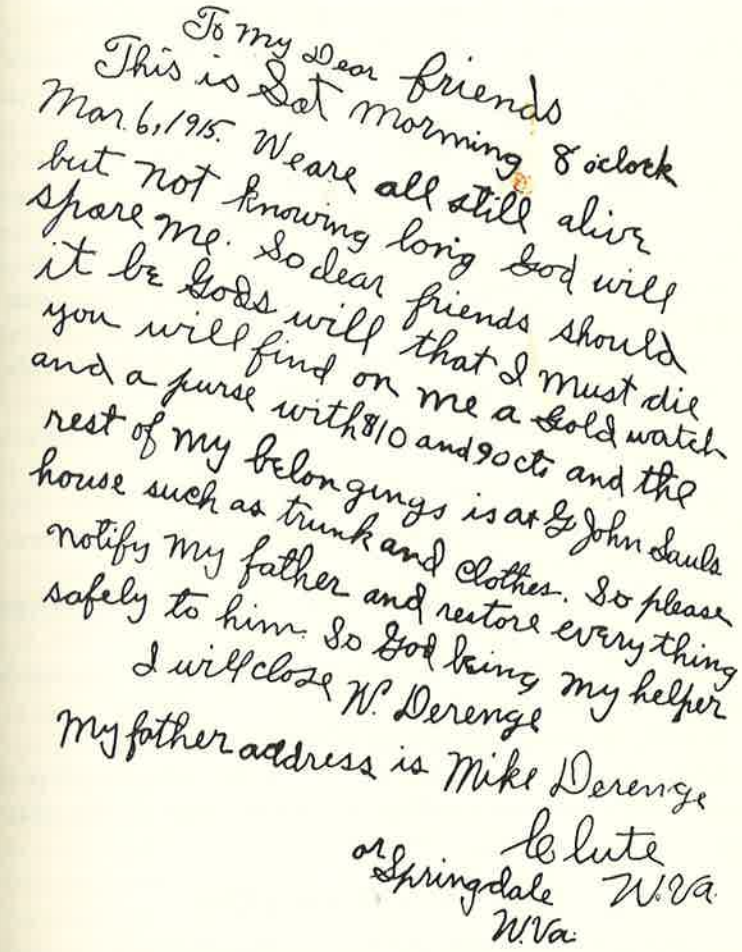
Hugh McMillian, the section foreman, was among the forty-two men in 10 left. He decided that in case they never reached safety, he should leave a note to his wife and children. In its pathetic tone it reads, as written on note paper:

"March 3rd. 10 left.

"In case we don't get out of our prison, I'm writing a few lines to our dear ones. Everyone are here from main heading and all those entries between No. 10 and No. 12 from 9 left. John Whalen and his father are safe. We are all hoping that rescue will reach us in time and all are praying to our Savior that such will happen. Trusting to God that air will last until they reach us. I'm writing to my wife Mary in case we don't get out alive to bring up the kiddies loving our Savior as I do. And our sins creep up in our faces at a time like this. Love to all. Hugh McMillian"

Officials said that 172 men had been in the mine on Monday and that a like number would likely be in on Tuesday.

The final conclusion was that 112 men died and 53 were rescued totaling 165. Counting the young man killed on the


To my Dear friends
This is Sat morning 8 oclock
Mar. 6, 1915. We are all still alive
but not knowing long God will
spare me. So dear friends should
it be Gods will that I must die
you will find on me a Gold watch
and a purse with $10 and 90 cts and the
rest of my belongings is at St John Sauls
house such as trunk and clothes. So please
notify my father and restore everything
safely to him. So God being my helper
I will close W. Derenge
My father address is Mike Derenge
Clute
or Springdale W.Va.
W.Va.

Facsimile of William Derenge's will and message written while entombed in the Layland Mine in No. 10 left entry with forty-one other men. (Courtesy of West Virginia Department of Archives and History.)

outside, there were only 164 inside. Men living today who remember say that actually 119 men died by the blast; seven bodies were never recovered or were not accounted for nor brought outside or both. If 119 died and 53 were rescued, the total inside would exactly equal the company's estimate of 172, the figure first given out. One fact remains, and that is, we will never know exactly.

Such doubts and errors created by the catastrophes showed a great need for a checking system. Finally, the tag system was adopted (nicknamed "dog tag") where the miner is issued a number tag to correspond with a tag in the wash-house. Before a miner goes into the mine, he is issued his tag and one remains on the board. In case of an explosion, the tag board tells the exact number of men inside.

The Layland explosion has a few features as an explosion of its own:

First, it was the first major explosion to occur in West Virginia to have any sizeable group of men to barricade themselves off and live.

Second, the barricaded men lived the longest time before rescue, nearly five days.

Third, first mine in southern West Virginia on the north side of New River to go.

Fourth, the fourth largest casualty list in the state.

Fifth, probably the only big one to be a dust explosion alone: There was no evidence of any methane in the blast area.

ROLL OF LAYLAND DEAD

Arlow, Wilson (Mike Olis)
Arthur, Stanton
Atkinson, John
Attena, Rosario
Baird, Frank
Beneie, Andy
Beneie, George
Beneie, Peter
Bennett, Fred
Borsuk, Weils
Bozach, Mike
Bryant, Dick
Butina, Andrew
Caldwell, Arthur

Carolla, Tory
Cappano, Tony
Clobucha, Andy
Cooper, Abner
Day, M. L. (Emanuel Lopez)
Delatz, Tony
DiTubio, Antonio
Donally, Ed
Dorsey, Wilton
Fadden, Martin
Fadlowitz, Dave
Fedder, Mike
Ferris, M.
Fitzpatrick, Vallie
Fitzpatrick, William
Fleger, Joe
Fleger, John
Lucupro, Fonkolo
Garritano, Guiseppi
Gibson, Lige
Gill, Walter
Gilkerson, Edward
Gioncinto, Aolio
Goddard, Homer
Graguvie, Andre
Hassen, Mahood
Havard, John
Hornsby, James
Hostonof, Ighats
Hurley, Dennis
Joswa, John[1]
Kessel, Welsen
Kincaid, Amos
Kiselon, Zahor
Klobuchar, Paul
Kostukervitz, Kostanti
Knopich, John
Kopico, John
Korchi, Amtro
Kueic, John
Lacy, Virgil
Laird, David
Legevi, Mike
Lowen, Henry
Lynch, Martin
Mavanuchi, Joe
Mavcidno, Charles
Maviano, Michele
McDaniel, Ben
McDaniel, Charles
McDaniel, George
McMillen, John
Miller, John
Moody, John
Morrison, Paul
Mosik, John
Myers, Abe
Navinsky, Walson
Osborn, Hobert
Otaka, Alex
Paguve, Bunagkr
Perry, Flory
Pakaani (Potani), Sebastiana
Perry, Roberto

1. John Joswa climbed the cable 250 feet from Eccles No. 6 shaft in that disaster when 190 died in April 1914, the first survivor to reach safety, only ten months prior to his death at Layland.

Petvowitz, Joe
Plesha, Steve
Palatch, Louis
Ponton, A. P.
Potapor, Daniel
Porchilo, Frank
Prodonitz, Louis
Propolic, Alex
Quick, Clarence
Ricci, John
Richard, Henry
Rotolo, Salvatore
Ruziski, Poru
Sandy, Tony
Saul, John
Saul, Thomas
Salosky, John
Salvatore, Alfred
Shaffer, L. L.
Simmons, J. E.
Smith, J. H.
Sowich, Frank
Spariaco, Jim
Spolaric, John
Spolaric, Tom
Suckes, Mike
Susky, Wilson
Supanski, Mike
Weeks, G. O.
Weber, Tony
Widmer, Nick
Wimmer, John L.
Zofinelli, Charles
Zupanski, Pete

Chapter 21

Boomer

November 30, 1915

Boomer, a coal mining town in 1915, sits on the banks of the Kanawha River, five miles below the scenic Kanawha Falls. The Hanna Coal Company[1] of Cleveland, Ohio, had opened a mine up Boomer Hollow, above the town and away from the river. The operation bloomed into a large one, with tipples opposite each other across the ravine. On one side the mine was called No. 1 South and on the lower, or downriver side, the mine was labelled No. 2 North. Both mines joined when entries were driven to head of the creek and around, thence down the other side. The main haulageways lay in the shape of a huge letter "U" with the open end toward the town and the valley. The mine dug the coal from the Eagle seam, averaging about six feet in height. The coal from this seam was more desirable and salable than almost all other coal mined in the region at that time.

On Tuesday morning, November 30, 1915, with a cold wind blowing, one hundred and ninety men entered the mine. At 10:43 A.M. the No. 2 North blew up. Thirty minutes later, before any rescue men could be organized to enter the blast-torn area, she blew again with a heavier and more terrific explosion. Experienced miners stated that the second blast was the culprit that killed twenty-two men and fatally injured another.

1. Interests of the famous Marcus A. Hanna, Cleveland, Ohio, millionaire, who promulgated William McKinley into the nation's presidency.

Some observers who were present at the time, stated that the mine blew at three intervals. Others said that she blew only twice. Miners working in 21 east before the explosion, heard noises in the worked out areas and were alarmed. They got together and started for the outside. Some of them were in the clear when the big explosion came that killed the twenty-three men. About a half hour later, another explosion came but not so terrific. A bookkeeper, at the mine office near the drift mouth, heard the big explosion and reported it immediately. No debris or flame came out either of the two drifts, nor was there any damage to the outside complex. In a few minutes smoke began pouring from the openings and continued for several hours.

Rescue squads from Cannelton, Carbondale, Ward, and other mines close by, rushed to Boomer. The surrounding mines all closed for the day so that the miners could come to the aid of stricken Boomer. Passenger trains on the K&M Railroad (now the B&O) brought in hundreds just to see the disaster sights, and some came to assist. The passenger coaches could not hold all the riders. The braver and more audacious males climbed atop the cars and rode anyway, despite the threats and protests of the train crews.

It was not until four o'clock Tuesday afternoon that rescue crews were able to enter the section where the explosion occurred. In the meantime, many of the men, unhurt in the other section, walked out, especially those working in the No. 1 South Mine. About dark, rescue men brought ten survivors from the North Mine in a bad state of shock. All of them survived. Then they found the first body, that of Neil Pauley.

Robert Yancy, a popular young man, a baseball player on the local team, athletic and physically strong, was close to the explosion area, but unhurt. He and two companions started running for one of the openings, other than the main entrances. They were close to daylight and fresh air when

Crowds outside machine shop used as morgue at Boomer explosion in November 1915. White boxes on left are coffins. (Courtesy of Dave Tamplin of Boomer, West Virginia, and the Montgomery *Herald*, Montgomery, West Virginia.)

they looked back to see another miner struggling to get out of the rapidly coming blackdamp, and to safety. Yancy told his comrades to go ahead that he was going back to get the stricken man. Yancy and the other man never made it. Robert Yancy died a hero's death.

On the following morning, Wednesday, December 1, all bodies had been recovered. The task of exploring was not hazardous since the mine was not badly damaged. All headings and rooms off 21 east were searched. Evidence was advanced that a solid shot in 1st right had set off the gas which had accumulated in the worked out rooms of 21 east.

Sam Demarco was the only man found alive in the blast area, but he died that night in the Montgomery Hospital.

The Boomer Coal Company officials were niggardly in their information to any newsman. The Charleston *Gazette*'s reporter was snubbed and told at first that no one was reported dead. Many stories came out that did not conform, especially that there were three explosions and that some said there were only two. Some said the first blast was a terrific one, and other stories stated the second did the damage. The *Gazette* reporter was critical of the company and let it be known. When the investigation of the explosion started, the reporter stated, "The officials to investigate the disaster have been furnished quarters in the offices of the company and have been treated with courtesy."

The coroner's jury met on December 6, 1915, and set forth the verdict that the blast was caused by "Gas explosion on the 1st. Right off 21st. East entry in the robbings where there were falls."

The close mouthness of the Boomer officials may account for discrepancies in the spelling of the victims' names. Many of the names, if not all of them, had to be obtained from outside sources by newspapermen. The list varies from the Fayette *Tribune,* the Charleston *Gazette,* and Shirley Donnelly's, *Fayette County's Coal Mine Disasters.*

BOOMER VICTIMS

Bartilo, Joe
Binder, Mike, listed also as Bonder
Coloto, Sam, listed also as Cobole
Cominsky, Carney
Crouse, John, assistant mine foreman; also spelled Krause
Dainacio, Sam, also spelled Demarco
Faber, Sam
Farber, Chris
Galloway, Lee or Louie
Goline, Crist
Hall, Edward
Hevener, George
Hoidesnon, Joe, also spelled Henderson and Hardison
Howard, A. B.
Kinney, William
Kobosky, Frank
Layanda, Paul, also listed as Leon
Parten, Sam
Pauley, Neil
Rose, Frank
Suber, John, also listed as "Sulier"
Pictero, Domineck, trapper boy, age sixteen, had no relatives
Yancy, Robert

POSTSCRIPT

In the late twenties, Boomer had another small explosion that killed fewer than five men. The State Department of Mines warned the Hanna Coal Company and demanded an adherence to state mining laws. The company became "huffy" about the order and moved all the equipment back to Ohio thus ending the Boomer Mine. In later years, strip mining scarred the mountainside where the fatal mine once operated.

The town regrouped and built a series of good looking houses, laid out streets, and today is a pleasant village. Not all the residents are miners, but workers in a nearby metallurgical plant.

Chapter 22

Yukon

December 15, 1917

The Yukon explosion of 1917 had an unusual human-interest story. A brother of one of the unfortunates identified the wrong man and the corpse was shipped home to Tazewell, Virginia, to be interred when the mistake was discovered and just in time. The body had to be returned to Susanna for another identification!

The geographical names surrounding this tragedy are most unusual. The mine that blew was called the Yukon Mine at Susanna—one name reminding one of the far frozen north while the pretty southern name brings memories of the ante-bellum pre-Civil War days and pretty southern ladies. This story takes place on Dry Fork Creek just below the town of War, another unusual name.

In December 1917, the nation was at war, the biggest conflict known to man up to that date. America had entered by declaration of April 6, 1917, against the Axis powers making it a total world conflict, later labeled World War I. The American government was frantically urging and aiding all industries to produce munitions, explosives, fuel, and food to help end this awful confrontation. Mines went into full production and there was a shortage of railroad cars to transport the black gold.

On December 15, 1917, eight months after war was declared, the Yukon Mine No. 1 could not obtain coal gondolas to load at the tipple. The mine had not worked since the past Wednesday. On Monday, a crew of eighteen men went inside

to build tracks into a new section of the mine so the tonnage of the big operation could be increased. This new section was to be electrified with the latest equipment for cutting and hauling coal. Motors took the place of mules. On this day, it is thought that a miner went into the heading, left a trapdoor open, which caused the air to short-circuit, which in turn allowed methane gas to accumulate. Then another miner using an open flame carbide light went into the area. Immediately eighteen men were burned and mangled to death. It was shortly after 4:00 P.M. before the miners were to quit work at 5:00 P.M.

The superintendent of the mine had visited the men and was returning outside. He was only 2,000 feet from them when the explosion came. He felt a slight jar only and was uninjured, but he knew the mine had blown up. He rushed unhurt to the outside a mile away.

By midnight rescue crews had brought fourteen bodies to the outside and had located four others. The mine roll showed seventeen men to be inside, but there was an error of one. The next morning, December 16, the other four were brought outside, seventeen coffins had been sent from Bluefield along with rolls of brattice cloth to clear the sections of gas. Then the question came up concerning another man not accounted for. He was the missing brother heretofore mentioned. The living brother identified the wrong man which caused the officials to think that all men were accounted for. Upon the arrival of the corpse at Tazewell, Virginia, not too many miles from War, the error was detected. When the body was reidentified, the search in the mine began again. Eventually the other body was found and identified properly.

The cause of this faulty identification was not to be blamed on anyone since all the bodies but four were badly burned and mangled. The missing man was white while the four recognizable bodies were black and were readily identified by their relatives.

The mine was damaged very little and work of producing coal was soon resumed. This was the first large disaster to strike the Dry Fork area, and the first of the Pocahontas Coal and Coke Company's major accidents. But time moved on and the Yukon blew again.

LIST OF VICTIMS

Brown, Dan
Cloud, George
Coils, Adolph
Coils, George
Compton, A. R.
Grisby, Bob
Hall, Frank
Hoop, Will
Hoster, Pete
Johnson, Ben
Johnson, Ed.
Necessary, Bob
Sheets, Lyn
Spears, Arthur
Spinex, George
Shuefim, Tom
Turpin, Will
The unidentified brother whose name was not available

When the coroner's jury met and heard all the testimony available concerning the Yukon catastrophe of December 15, 1917, they came to the conclusion that:

1. An open door in the main intake airway resulted in a short-circuit of air causing an accumulation of methane gas.
2. That the superintendent and mine foreman were guilty in violation of Section 62 of the State Mine Code which states that no man may enter a mine until the fire boss has made an examination.
3. State chief mine inspector stated that the explosion resulted from an accumulation of methane gas.
4. A. M. Prentiss, mine superintendent and I. M. Pittman, mine foreman, were brought before a court and fined fifty dollars each.

Chapter 23

Glen Rogers

November 6, 1923

On a dreary November 6 morning in 1923, with a cold drizzling rain, the Glen Rogers shaft mine blew up and took the lives of twenty-seven men as quickly as one could explode a flashbulb. The earth didn't shake, no smoke came from the shaft mouth, and all seemed complacent on the outside. But a man working near the fan saw something very odd. The huge steam-fed exhaust fan, pulled with a long belt, screeched to a halt and ran backwards for several revolutions. The workman knew that the mine had blown up. Moments later excitement grew with men shouting, giving orders, sending for officials, and wailing and cursing about what happened below.

Soon the bosses and workmen discovered that the cage guides were not damaged, and that the fan was back to its normal revolutions. A check on the bottom found several men clamoring to be brought topside. Soon it was known that an explosion had gone off in the Joy section (this section was named for a cutting and loading machine made by the Joy Manufacturing Company). Not far from the shaft bottom, slate had fallen in such quantities that the first inspection seemed to indicate that the men inside the Joy section were entombed and probably safe.

The first news story in the Raleigh *Register,* a Beckley daily newspaper, headlined this story:

"GLEN ROGERS MINE EXPLOSION ENTOMBS 40 MEN

"HOPE FOR RECOVERY RUNS HIGH

"SLATE FALL SHUTS OFF RESCUERS

"MINE SHAFT NOT AFFECTED."

The dragon belched his methane gas and a spark got near his nostrils. His burp came at 7:45 A.M. on a Tuesday, forty-five minutes after the men started working.

At approximately 10:00 A.M. the fate of the twenty-seven was evident and the rescue crews were getting ready to open up the Joy section and bring out the bodies. Brattice cloth was being strung and air forced into the section. There was no evidence of fire.

SOME HISTORY OF THE MINE

Glen Rogers was located in the headwaters of Laurel Fork, a tributary of Clear Fork and Guyandotte rivers, and lay in the upper end of Wyoming County against the Raleigh County line, thereby the name derived: The Raleigh-Wyoming Coal Company. Some time after the explosion, it became "Mining" Company in the name instead of "Coal" Company.

At the beginning of the operation, the area was isolated from the outside world, the only means of transportation being by horseback and wagon over a narrow dirt trail. Soon the new company laid a narrow-gauge track over a previously used grade, and supplies were brought in by a "dinkey" engine. The Virginian Railway soon built a standard track into the region from the main line at Maben, twenty miles away, and then a freight and passenger train service was begun.

The shaft was sunk in the Beckley Seam at the lowest elevation which engineers had located by drilling, prior to the turn of the century. The depth was 680 feet to the coal level with a 40-foot sump, a total of 720 feet from ground level to sump bottom. A skiff fell into the sump while it was being dug killing five men.

The coal seam was about six feet in thickness with a bad

slate top. The mine was found to be "hot" or "gassy" from the time the coal seam was reached. Two shafts were sunk, one being an air tube just 100 yards from the coal hoisting shaft. While driving a connecting tunnel between the two shafts, a gas explosion badly burned five men, who survived. This experience led the company to install precautions against marsh gas.

Open lights were permitted at this time in the state's mines, but only the approved safe battery powered head light was used in the Glen Rogers mine. All the modern safety measures for "hot" gas mines were adopted and used, but one fatal mistake was made on that Tuesday morning. Inexperienced men short-circuited the air only to be killed, and to kill other unsuspecting miners.

According to the investigations and the opinion of the miners, the blast was caused by disruption of the air current into the Joy section. Three men, two of them from the machine shop, James Doyle and Bill Harrington, and a mason, Joe Gurock, were sent down to build a concrete stop to replace a wooden stop. The two shopmen were not experienced in mine ventilation. The other was a foreigner, inexperienced in mining, but could lay concrete blocks. The men were told to build the permanent stop but were not properly instructed or possibly ignored the instructions. They first tore out the wood stop and proceeded to build the concrete one. In so doing, they short-circuited the air into the entire section since the stop was at the section's entrance. It took about ten minutes to tear out the wood stop. Within thirty-five minutes, more or less, enough gas accumulated in the section to explode, that is blow the section. At the point where Doyle, Harrington, and Gurock were the impact was terrific. These men were practically blown apart. Then the slate fell upon them twelve feet deep. The bodies of the twenty-four other men up the entry were recovered by four

o'clock that afternoon, and the mangled parts of the other three were partially recovered by nine o'clock that evening.

The rescue men stated that probably the three mangled men were mixed in each other's caskets since the pieces were not always recognizable. For instance, Harrington was an athletic type young man, therefore, his legs and arms were more muscular. James Doyle was an old man and his head was recognizable by his grey hair. Gurock was thirty-seven years old and in between.

For several days afterwards, chunks and pieces of these three were brought out, some to be buried unceremoniously in the Davis Graveyard adjunct to the present Glen Rogers Grade School. The story goes that some of the pieces of human flesh were burned in the firebox of the yard dinkey used for hauling supplies.

When it was known that the mine had blown, immediately word was sent to the outside world for help. Glen Rogers, being on a branch line of the Virginian Railroad with no other feasible means of transportation since dirt roads had turned to mud, was nearly isolated. A special train was immediately sent from Princeton, seventy miles away, with doctors and nurses to assist in case of injuries.[1] The train was there before any bodies were recovered. The nurses, a dozen of them, handsome and trim in their white uniforms and pretty blue capes stood above and in full view of the shaft mouth as the burnt and blackened bodies were brought up. In the afternoon the train and its occupants left the grim scene.

Help was also asked of rescue teams from the Winding Gulf, McDowell, and New River fields. They arrived in the afternoon to find that all bodies had been recovered by the local miners, and that all survivors had come outside safely and unhurt.

During the night, all the bodies were loaded in a Virginian

1. In almost all explosions of the state's history from 1900 to the present, there have been very few injuries. Nearly all have been sudden death.

Railway baggage car, side by side, and transported to a mortuary in Mullens, the nearest town. After embalming, the bodies were then shipped to their homes to be interred. Bill Harrington's torn remains were sent to the home of his parents in Upper Michigan. Wright, an expert mining man, shortly arrived from Scotland, was buried by the Masonic Order in Beckley Cemetery. Only one was a native of Wyoming County where the mine was located, and one a native of Raleigh, the adjoining county. Several victims were from Michigan. Gurock was a native of Austria, but came to America from Poland. He is buried in the Catholic Cemetery in Beckley, West Virginia.

Gurock's death was a pitiful story in that he had brought his wife and six children here only three weeks before his death. His wife could say but a few words in English. When she came to the mine that morning, she was told that Joe was

Grave of Joe Gurock, Catholic Cemetery, killed in the Glen Rogers Mine explosion on November 6, 1923.

safe and helping with the rescue, that being the reason for her not seeing him. She remained in ignorance of his death all day, and that evening just before dark, she came to the mine carrying a dinner bucket with his supper with six little orphan children trailing behind.

THOSE WHO DIED

Thomas Holly, fire boss	Howard Samuels
Billy Bowden	Harry Ivey
Eula Aliff[2]	Aurshel Sturm
Robert Sharon	Clarence Puckett
James Stewart	Paul Patts
Tom Simms	Ernest King
Oscar King	William Stokes
W. A. Cook[3]	Emil Unger
James Robinson	Roy Brown
David Hill	S. P. Gurrant
C. E. Johnson	Henry Wright
Rufis Twitty	Joe Gurock
Robert Clair	James Doyle

Bill Harrington

Bill Harrington was a brother to Francis Harrington while Harry Ivey was a brother to Betty Harrington, the wife of Francis Harrington.

Thirteen of the victims were single men and thirteen were married. One was a widower with dependent children. Forty-two children were left fatherless. All dependents received state compensation while $500 was left to the dependents of the victims who had worked up to three months for the company.

Today, Glen Rogers is a fairly prosperous "ghost town"

2. Aliff—native of Wyoming County.
3. Cook—native of Raleigh County.

with only about half of the original coal company houses. The mine is closed and the shafts are sealed. The tipple is gone, its bull wheels no longer spin to the tune that this mine once led the state in tonnage mined. The powerhouse, machine shops, and the majestic 227-foot concrete smokestack are no more. The grim and dirty shaft mouth is a mute reminder to the old-timers of the many dead this hole sent back from her three other small explosions, a mountain bump, slate falls, and other accidents that kill miners.

Chapter 24

Second Yukon

March 28, 1924

People in the towns of War, Susanna, and other places on Dry Fork, a tributary of Tug River, distinctly remember the horrible explosion in the Yukon No. 1 Mine on December 15, 1917, somewhat over six years later than the one that killed eighteen men. The relatives of these men continued to live on Dry Fork, and the people still talked about the Glen Rogers disaster, in the adjoining county, of this same winter just five months previous when twenty-seven died.

Mining towns are always conscious of the danger that lies underground for the men who work there, especially in the "hot" mines or the ones that have had a previous disaster. They always worry, particularly the wives and children, fearing that it may happen again. Yet the miners say that the mine is taken care of better than before. They talked of better equipment and newer safety devices. New mine laws require closer inspection and more precaution. Such was the case at Yukon in March 1924.

Yukon had two mines in one; the older mine, No. 1, opened in 1910 by the Harmon family, had opened new entries, in order to increase output. The No. 2 Mine was a drift mouth nearby with an entry running parallel to No. 1 with the two entries or main haulageways junctional at the head about a mile underground. The bigger tonnage was being produced by No. 1 at this time. On that fateful March 28, 125 men entered No. 1 and about 34 went by motor into the No. 2 Mine. The second trip carrying eight

men jumped the track. Three of the men did not stay to assist in retracking the motor but took a shortcut through the old workings, especially rooms 5 and 6. At 7:27 A.M., the No. 2 Mine blew up killing twenty-four men. The three bodies of the men who left the motor wreck were found in the old workings, but one was some distance from the other two. These facts led to quite a bit of speculation and varied opinions.

The 125 men in the No. 1 thought that slate falls had caused the jar or that there was pillar robbing going on. But a torn and bleeding foreigner, with incoherent language, especially when excited, came running into the other section without hat or coat trying to tell the other men what had happened. He had been battered by the air rush ahead of the blast. Soon the men knew the cause and got safely from the mine, but the twenty-four in No. 2 had died immediately. The mine air expert reported twenty-six dead but only twenty-four bodies were found.

Crack rescue teams from surrounding mines were there quickly and checked for entering the mine an hour after the blow up. The two fans were kept running at full speed pushing fresh air into the two mines. The federal mine rescue car was rushed from Nemours to the scene but all bodies had been located. By the time the federal car had arrived at the day's end, all the victims had been brought outside. Twenty-five caskets had been sent in from Welch, the county seat, just a few miles away. (Dry Fork is on a branch line of the N&W Railway with the junction at Iaeger on Tug River.)

The news telling of the second Yukon mine disaster was slow to reach the outside world, the only communications being telegraph, and the one phone which belonged to the Appalachian Power Company, and by the railroad passenger trains in and out. As a result, Chief Lambie of the mine department did not arrive until all bodies had been recovered.

A coroner's jury was selected and the investigation of

causes and facts began. Evidence produced was that the three men who took a short route through old workings had struck a pocket of gas with an open light causing a gas and dust explosion. The jury did not rule on this as a cause but a conjecture. It was further found that some miner had stored a heavy amount of explosives and caps in one of the worked out rooms so that he would have plenty when needed, and it was a possibility that he had stolen and stored it, since miners at the time had to provide their own explosives and caps or detonators. The jury's verdict ruled this out but did decide the explosion had started as a result of a discharged explosive that had ignited the dust thence killing twenty-four men. No individual or individuals were blamed for the explosion by the jury's verdict.

The blast did considerable damage to No. 2 Mine, caused enormous slate fall. Some of the bodies were badly burned and some mangled but the majority were not greatly disfigured.

A mystery remains: Why was one of the three men found alone some distance from the others? On the way to work, men usually stay together.

LIST OF DEAD MARCH 28, 1924, YUKON

Ball, George
Barnsky, George
Batrick, Tony
Cathell, George
Christian, Henry
Edmunds, Russell
Ferbell, Leonard
Gilbert, Harry
Gilbert, Lon
Hicks, Harrison
Jackson, George
Jones, L. E.
Katonia, Joe
Leska, John
Leslie, Jean
Marinola, Mike
Mathews, Steve
Mellon, George
Monola, Mike
Munsey, Frank
Payne, George
Rose, Charles
Worley, R. F.
Zaske, Tony

Chapter 25

Benwood

April 28, 1924

West Virginia's third worst mine explosion on April 28, 1924, next to Eccles on April 28, 1914, seemed to commemorate and outdo the second worst on the same day of the month and exactly a decade later. The two explosions had some similarities besides being on April 28. They were of terrific proportions, being so violent as to be indescribable. They both killed every participant within the mine and Benwood was next to the last big explosion to do that—not to leave a survivor.

The coal mining town of Benwood is very nearly in the outskirts of Wheeling, West Virginia, and directly across the Ohio River from Bellaire, Ohio. The disaster is the most northern one to occur in the state of West Virginia and the only major one in the Northern Panhandle.

The state and nation was mourning still previous disasters; the clay still fresh on graves from the blast at Glen Rogers six months before taking twenty-seven lives and the Yukon explosion of exactly one month prior to Benwood snuffing out the lives of twenty-four miners. Benwood was the most northern disaster and Yukon was the most southern up to that time.

The terrific Benwood explosion happened on a Monday morning just thirty-five minutes[1] after the men entered the mine. First reports were that 110 men had checked in, but in

1. One man's watch had stopped at 7:04 A.M. Men were at their places by seven.

the final count, there were 119 bodies recovered. (Compare to the Layland count.)

The scenes at the two mine shafts were typical of this type of disaster. The women and children rushed to the scene, frantic, screaming, and sobbing, asking incoherently for information, hopeful that it would be good. In Benwood's case, from the very first everything seemed hopeless for any miner to have survived. Barricades or roped off areas on the surface were essential to keep back the crowds, some of them only curious. Law and order in such cases must be kept and law enforcement officers were sent in immediately.

The first call was for rescue teams, which are always on standby: Some were close enough to report quickly. The Hinchman and Bellaire squads were the closest and among the first to enter the shaft. Other teams came quickly from Steubenville, Pittsburgh, and as far away as Cincinnati, Ohio, and Williamson, West Virginia.

On first entering the mine, rescue teams encountered unheard of obstacles. The roofs had fallen in closing up haulageways and entries until the teams at times had to crawl through small openings to get into larger spaces to see if any miners might still be alive.

Anyone who reads of mine disasters or studies coal mines can readily conclude that no braver men have ever been organized than mine rescue teams. Monuments in all mining states should be erected to them and a roster kept of those who have died trying to be their "brothers' keepers."

The waiting relatives stayed through the day with no news. Nightfall came and scores of fires were built on the hillsides by wives, fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters and some fiances, anxious to hear some hopeful news. The leader of the Steubenville corps came out and announced that to find a survivor was well nigh impossible.

A few men might have penetrated deep into old workings and barricaded themselves against blackdamp but the chances

were too slim for a vestige of hope. Many of those who had been waiting went home sobbing, all hope gone.

As the teams relayed in their struggles to recover bodies, they restated facts about unbelievable force of the terrific impact of the concussion. Some told of heavy mine timbers being thrown so violently against the walls of unmined coal that they became splinters. Some were as reduced as a match stick run over by a railroad locomotive.

The roof had fallen and large boulders were shoved into the main entries and working rooms, and rocks, gigantic in size, were carried long distances down the haul ways.

By 3:00 P.M. Tuesday, twenty-seven bodies had been found. The system devised when a body was found was a commendable one; that every corpse be tagged, and the place where found be stated on the tag; then the bodies be brought to the shaft bottom where physicians descended into the mine and disinfected the decaying corpses before they could be brought to the outside. This was done to prevent an outbreak of some sort of disease.

As recovery men penetrated deeper into the torn workings, they found that 8 north was the most difficult one to probe, as men worked around the clock trying to dig a passageway into it in search of more bodies known to be there.

As the hours ran into days, the rescue or recovery of bodies became more difficult and obnoxious since the bodies were decaying and the odors were nearly unbearable. It was necessary for eight men to carry one dead body. The crews worked in relays of every 750 feet, since the task of lugging the stretchers over mountains of fallen slate and rock, jumbled mine timbers, and twisted steel track became arduous.

Six men were required to carry one roll of brattice cloth containing a hundred lineal feet. Methane gas was accumulating in dangerous proportions in the torn entries and rooms, causing considerable danger and delay. Brattice cloth was being strung and hung into position to direct fresh air into

those places to dispel the explosive element before the rescue men could search for more bodies.

For several days a faint hope existed in the minds of inspectors and recovery men that some of the miners had gotten ahead of the blackdamp and gone deep into old workings where they had barricaded themselves. However, after digging into entry 8 where twenty-seven more bodies were found—now totaling seventy-six—all hope faded. Some of the relatives still remained on the hillsides, night and day, outside the Browns Run shaft hoping for a miracle. But on Friday, all gave up hoping; relatives prepared to bury their dead.

Some of the bodies found were terribly mangled, evidence that the force of the explosion had hurled them over a hundred feet crushing them against the ribs of coal. Some were found dead of burns, some of blackdamp, and some were covered with slate. One motorman was found sitting at his controls on the motor buried under an avalanche of slate.

Track was repaired from the bottom into nearly a mile of the wrecked mine and a motor put into operation. This helped greatly for overworked recovery teams since the bodies were carried at first about a mile and placed in cars to be brought to the shaft bottom. The last of the bodies were brought out on May 6 and officials declared that the gruesome task was over. Benwood began burying its dead; however, nine bodies remained unidentified.[2] The first services were held Monday, eight days after the terrible blast. One of the pitiful scenes was the interment of three pairs of brothers. Two double graves were dug and the brothers interred together. The men's names were: Hugh McGill and George McGill, Mike Capobianco and Rocco Capobianco, and John Golembeiski and Stanislaus Golembeiski. A wife of one of the McGill brothers was on the high seas en route to America from Scotland to join her husband. She was not aware of his

2. It was never published that identification was ever made, however, a full list of names was recorded.

death and did not know of the tragedy until the ship docked. The Capobiancos were from Italy.

No casket was opened during the services or at the burial due to the terrible condition in which the bodies were found.

BENWOOD VICTIMS APRIL 28, 1924

Angelas, Jim
Albano, Salvatore
Aprea, Raffelo
Balanzo, Frank
Baranoski, Stanley
Beiley, Wasil
Bitzano, Frank
Canera, Carlo
Capobianco, Mike
Capobianco, Rocco
Christo, Tony
Cognitti, Domenico
Cojecticitnia, Maria
Conti, Frank
Cooper, Domenik
Corbi, Pasquelo
Crosby, Mark
Dambroski, Sam
Daniele, Marafino
DiGorge, Carlo
DiScanna, Giovani
Dlugobiski, Adam
Duhuolas (Duyla), John
Fana, Pasquila
Ferri, Patsy
Ferrante, Celestino
Frank, John, Sr.
Frank, John, Jr.
Fzayares, Nick
Ganis, James
Gannokis, Gus
George, Mike
Gojimski, Ignac
Golembeiski, John
Golembeiski, Stanislaus
Hamill, Antonic
Harve, James
Herris, Mike
Herron, Mat (J. J. Boyle)
Hojda, Joe
Holliday,
George William, Sr.
Holliday,
George William, Jr.
Horvath, Alexander
Jellarick, John
Joseph, Lewellyn
Kedziorski, Joe
Kevien, Antonio
Kiipclia, John
Koknakaas, Thieodore
Kolodzeyski, Joe
Kon, Krazinier
Kopetz, Kazimer
Koziemsko, Joe
Kupcha, John
Lakomy, Waldyslaw
Levicki, Lenard

Lisak, Filok
Malasannskis, Mike
Malicki, Mikoloy
Maylyski, John
Marka, Josef
Masino, Nick
Mavcoginskis, Nick
Mazzella, Frank
Mickjmovich, Meli
Miglaccio, Antonio
Mikolche, Stany
McCarrihan, George
McGill, George
McGill, Hugh
Oblizajck, Walter
Onort, Peter
Orban, Ignatius
Padula, Nick
Paich, Melo
Paich, Nick
Pakinlle, Joe
Penec, Andy
Papulos, Emanuel
Parise, Santo
Paree, Egnetts
Patrick, Mike
Picbowicz, John
Rangel, Agustin
Rawlins, Joshua
Rea, Guiseppe
Robinsky, Steini
Rodey, Stany
Rotellini, Marino
Russell, William
Sabatino, Salvatore
Salnich, Joseph
Skachawicz, Wojoieck
Samilli, Joseph
Sarinos, Angelo
Senchol, Sam
Sinios, Pete
Slava, Albert
Sloga, John
Sloga, Pete
Smith, William
Snedden,
Alexander Fargie
Snedden, Walter
Spignuri, Genera
Staczviski, Mike
Swoski, John
Szalajka, Andy
Szalajka, Fzidor
Vargo, Steve
Vitello, Gaetaus
Vitello, Ralph
Vitello, Samuel
Wagner, Leo
Watson, David
Webster, William
Wiadrawaki, Lawerence
Weinviena, Wienty
Wood, Kenneth
Zuk, John

Of the 119 names, only 14 were of English-Irish extraction.

Chapter 26

Barrackville

March 17, 1925

Another tragical Tuesday and another fateful March, the day of the week and the month of the year most likely to kill coal miners by methane gas explosion. March has a scientific reason, but Tuesday is only a conjecture; and it happened in this way at Barrackville, on Tuesday evening, March 17, 1925, when a night crew of thirty-three men and thirty-six horses perished in a mysterious mine blow-up. Almost all mine explosions are attributed to either marsh gas or coal dust, but this one was thought to be man-made until investigations exonerated the suspects.

Barrackville is a coal town a few miles from Fairmont, county seat of Marion County whose every square foot is underlaid with the hefty Pittsburgh Seam. Not far away from Barrackville, due south, lies the famed Monongah, scene of America's worst mine tragedy. Four miles west is Farmington, too well known for its disasters. Lumberport and Nola-Sardis are two more sites where miners died at their work.

The Barrackville shaft, 300 feet deep, is sunk below the waters of Buffalo Creek. The residential area is not far from the mine. In 1925 coal was gathered from the workings and hauled to the main entries by horses. The animals were stabled underground and never brought outside until useless. They were almost always blind from continuous non-use of their eyes.

On this Tuesday evening, a night shift went into the mine to cut coal, repair track, set timbers, etc., in preparation for

the coming day's shift. They did not load out or haul any coal to the bottom. A full sized crew of men did this on the day shift. Stabled in a large room near the shaft bottom were the thirty-six horses not in use on the night shift. Thirty-three men went into different workings labeled as North Main, Main West, and one other section. Some of the men were as far as a mile from the others. At 9:28 P.M., the mine blew up killing every man and animal inside in an instant.

Three shafts went down into the mine; one for the air with a fan above, one as a main portal for the men to enter, and one for hoisting coal only. When the blast came it was so terrific that it wrecked the cages and all hoisting facilities beyond immediate use. The concussion damaged the fan and nearly closed all passageways into the mine workings. The first objective was to get the fan back into working order so that fresh air would dispel the blackdamp and suck out the rapidly accumulating methane gas. The next step was to rig up a system to lower rescue men to the shaft bottom at coal level. The company did not have a muck bucket and had to borrow one from a Farmington mine several miles away and rush it to Barrackville by truck. Frantic and hard working men set up a derrick over the shaft hole and attached the muck bucket to the end of a long wire cable. They completed the task by 2:00 A.M., five and one-half hours after the explosion.

Chief of the State Department of Mines, R. M. Lambie, and several other state mine inspectors were at the scene by the time workmen completed the hoisting arrangement. Chief Lambie was the first to be lowered into the mine with one other inspector. His intention was to test the gases before allowing rescue men to attempt a search. At first, three men climbed into the bucket but it was too crowded and one remained topside.

To ride a swinging, twisting, and swirling one way and then the other bucket, about four feet deep and three feet wide

was an awesome and shaky task. To know when the bucket struck bottom was a trial and error method by the hoisting engineer, but he soon found his markings and landed the men safely.

Mr. Lambie, on first probing into the mine, called to the top by a portable telephone, saying, "We have reached the horses. They are all dead. There are no human bodies here."

From the very first it was suspicioned that the mine had been blown up by someone planting a bomb inside. Such an effort had happened in 1916 when this same mine blew up killing ten men. (In 1916 the operation belonged to the Jamison interests.) After Chief Lambie's first entry into the mine, rescue men followed. They claimed that they smelled nitroglycerin fumes near the shaft bottom. The next morning, Wednesday, quite a furor arose, bringing state police investigation onto the scene. A miner reported and named a prime suspect whom he saw coming off the cage before the evening shift entered the mine. The state police found the suspect along with two others, also suspicioned, and lodged all three in the Marion County Jail at Fairmont. On Thursday, the Fairmont *Times* printed a story that the belief was strong that a dynamite-glycerin bomb had been planted about one hundred yards from the shaft bottom. From this point, the destruction seemed to come toward the main hoisting shaft, doing considerable damage to the enginehouse and boiler rooms on the outside, contrary to rule of previous explosions, inside the mine rather than to the outside, as it was first believed.

On the first try to deep penetration into the mine, it was claimed that all men were presumed dead, but Chief Lambie stated that the death of the horses did not necessarily mean that all the men had died, too. There was the possibility that they had gone deeper into the mine and barricaded themselves off. No bodies were found close to the shaft bottom. For men to go deep inside the mine, the risk of the killing

blackdamp was great. The sure method of testing was by using a canary bird. One was brought in and taken cautiously toward the Main West into 18 right. The little fellow gasped a time or two and paid the sacrifice on the altar of industry. Five bodies were found in this section, most of them in the Main West, but some were found in Main North. It was felt that some men in Main West might be entombed and alive.

As rescue men strung brattice and penetrated deeper into Main West, they encountered smoke and heat indicating that the mine was on fire at some point. This obstacle delayed the search for bodies or survivors. Fire-fighting equipment was brought in and the fire was subdued the following day.

On Sunday, following the blast of the previous Tuesday, the officials and rescue men still held some hope for twenty-two men known to be two miles from the shaft bottom. But at midnight on March 22, twenty-six bodies were found in the Main West butt of No. 8 heading. Only two bodies remained and no hope was held for their survival. Two days later the rescue men found and brought the last of the victims to the shaft bottom.

Unlike other state explosions, in taking care of the dead, Barrackville mine authorities had the caskets for the victims lowered to the shaft bottom where the corpses were prepared for burial by mortician R. C. Jones of Fairmont. The bodies when ready for interment were hoisted to daylight and hauled away, each to its final destination.

Further probing and investigations by state and federal inspectors led to considerable confusion and opinion as to the cause. One fact came to light that lessened the suspicion of criminal intent and that was that devastation was at its worst deep inside the mine and not near the shaft bottom. This evidence led investigators to believe that the explosion was set off near the point of greatest damage.

The coroner's jury sat on March 29, 1927, thirteen days after the catastrophe and concluded that a slate fall had

knocked a steel beam into a motor trolly wire whose AC ignited a pocket of gas.

A. G. Kendall and the other two suspects were released from jail for lack of evidence in the accusation of attempting to destroy the mine. No feasible motive could be found. The arrests were never official, thereby nothing was ever put on docket in the Marion County Circuit Clerk's office.[1]

HUMAN-INTEREST INCIDENTS

Mike was too stubborn to enter the mine. His buddy got killed two months before the mine explosion and Mike refused to work inside anymore so he was put to work outside. He was tough, chewed tobacco, but he did not "cuss" because he couldn't talk since Mike was a horse. All his other stable pals died in the explosion.

Jay Wells, a member of a Morgantown rescue team, rushed to Barrackville immediately with his teammates when news of the disaster reached him. When Wells arrived, he learned that his brother, Claude, was among the missing. Jay refused to pull out of the team. He continued hour after hour, even as his team rested. He personally found the body of his brother several days after the blast. He rested and continued to help recover the remaining victims.

Heartbreaking Story

Callie Halstead moved to Barrackville from Powellton, near Montgomery. Sometime afterwards his wife died leaving him with five motherless children, the oldest, a girl of eight. She took care of the younger ones, bought the groceries, and kept the house. Callie worked the night shift leaving the children alone.

On the morning after the tragedy, the little eight-year-old housekeeper went to the company store and asked, "Why

1. Information given by Charles H. Dodd, clerk of the Circuit Court of Marion County, 1974.

hasn't my daddy come home from the mines?" The office men told her that her daddy was working overtime as he sometimes did. She went back and later that afternoon she came and asked again why her daddy did not come home and why were all these people around. They broke down, crying and sobbing, and told her that her daddy was lost in the mine explosion the past night.

POSTSCRIPT

Today the bull wheels continue to spin, hoisting coal from beneath the waters of Buffalo Creek.[2] The town with its nice homes and good people has an interesting history. Billy Ice lies buried in the Ice Cemetery, but in life he earned the sobriquet of "Indian Billy," famous Indian fighter. His exploits helped to pioneer and settle the area and county. A beautiful old covered bridge which spans Buffalo Creek is still used and kept intact—proud of its history. During the Civil War, a Confederate raider gutted this section of Marion County, but spared the bridge.

LIST OF VICTIMS

Ambrose, John
Ammev, Bernard
Ausbur, Charles
Austin, Willie
Brake, A. C.
Butter, J. H.
Casner, J. A.
DeHart, T. R.
Day, Tom
Evans, Harold
Gabbert, J. W.
Halstead, Callie
Harper, A. J.
Kennedy, Curtis
Kittle, W. H.
Knotts, J. W.
Marshall, Burt
Morster, Harry
Modas, Walter
Perkins, Hayes
Richter, Walter
Robinson, William

2. Buffalo Creek in northern West Virginia has given up many dead from her mines such as Barrackville and Farmington. However, Buffalo Creek of southern West Virginia suffered the horrible flood from a coal mine water dam in 1972.

Samack, William
Souders, Leonard
Steele, J. C.
Stiffler, Elmer
Taylor, James
Tempest, Pete
Thompson, Walter
Waldron, Hobart
Wells, Claude
Wilson, Lloyd
Woody, Arthur

Chapter 27

Jamison (Farmington) No. 8

January 14, 1926

The Jamison No. 8 Mine at Farmington, a shaft mine sunk 302 feet deep on the waters of Buffalo Creek, blew up on a Thursday night while forty-six men were at work deep inside the earth. For many hours all men were given up for dead, but a spectacular rescue brought twenty-one men back to their overwrought families. Nineteen men, however, never saw the light of day again.

The coal was the thick Pittsburgh Seam, high enough for horses to be used to haul the coal to the partings and thence to the bottom. Two stables underground contained these animals around the clock. Once inside the mine, they stayed until crippled or useless; then they were brought topside and turned to pasture, usually blind from being too long in total darkness. One stable was about two and one-half miles from the shaft bottom. The fact concerning the stable was relevant to the rescue.

On January 14, forty-six men entered the mine on the night shift. One group of fifteen men went into a newly opened section labeled Seven Right to operate punch machines. This new heading left the main entry and ran in a northeasterly direction for a half mile. At 10:30 P.M. on another "Black Thursday" this Seven Right blew up, and it had only one direction to go and that was toward the shaft bottom. The fifteen men working the punch machines, when located, were found to have been killed instantly.

On the outside, the first evidence of an explosion was seen

by some men working near the shaft entrance, when dust and smoke shot from the pit followed by a sheet of flame. Immediately the hoisting engineer in the engineer room got a signal to pull the cage to the top. Luckily, the cage was on the bottom, since six men were nearby when the flame passed near enough to scorch them. They ran to the bell cord and signalled the engineer to hoist away, the blackdamp being only seconds behind them. This is another instance where men barely missed death by being at a given place at a given time.

Company officials were sent for at once, and rescue men commandeered to enter the mine in hopes of finding miners still alive. Since the cage and guides were not damaged, it was possible for men to enter the mine as soon as they could be readied for probing the blast area. There was only one escape route or entrance way into the mine[1] and that was by way of the hoisting shaft. The first crew to go down found massive destruction from the bottom toward the headings. Forty men were still unaccounted for. The rescue crews found blown out stops, over-cast timbers, brattices destroyed, heavy slate falls, and general wreckage. Blackdamp was creeping into the entries mixed with accumulations of explosive methane.

State Mine Inspector Riggleman was in Fairmont and sped to Farmington by car as quickly as possible. He took charge of preparations to probe the mine and asked that brattice cloth, a heavy type burlap, lumber, nails, saws, and necessary tools along with workmen be sent into the mine to restore the airways into proper order. Luckily, the fan, which ran backward several revolutions when the blast whooshed upward, was not damaged and kept pumping fresh air into the mine (in the event of fire in the mine the fan must be stopped), which showed no signs of being on fire.

1. State law compelled the mine to have an air shaft; this one had no hoist or escape ladder.

By midnight, nearly two hours after the explosion, rescue men were inside far enough to start probing the workings. They followed the path of the worst wreckage which would lead them to the place where the blast began. They were hampered, however, by the terrible wreckage and ever-present blackdamp. By 6:00 A.M. Friday, they were nearly two miles deep inside when they came upon four dead miners. Two of them were identified as W. E. Myers and his son, Herbert, age twenty.

Friday morning the sun rose giving a new light and a new day to the outside world, but in the darkness, crack rescue teams from other mines were putting up brattices in a desperate effort to reach Seven Right. They were two miles underground in a dark, ugly mess, while outside, the earth was pretty under a January sun, despite the season being winter. This brightness was synonymous to the oncoming rescue of twenty-one men.

The morning air was filled with the sobbing of children and the wailing of women whose loved ones were inside the blast-torn mine. Everyone was anxious to get some news from below, especially good news, since the most of the miners were not in Seven Right. It was felt that this group of about twenty-three had not been caught in the direct line of the concussion which went toward the shaft bottom. This fact gave hope and wishes to several that there was a remote chance of these men being alive somewhere in the untouched part of the mine.

Among this group inside were mine foreman Getty, an experienced man, along with a Mr. McNeal, an older man, intelligent, experienced, and knowledgeable of what to do in a crisis. These two favorable factors lent further hope of a rescue. Two of McNeal's sons, with the rescue team, felt that their father was somewhere safe in another section of the mine barricaded from the deadly blackdamp.

Fresh horses had to be brought in and lowered to the

bottom to haul away the wreckage and debris. All the horses in the stable near the bottom were either killed or in pitiful shape. The other horses were stabled far inside the mine and could not be reached. This seemed a playback of the poor horses at Barrackville of ten months before, whereas they were all killed outright.

The mine had been sprinkled the day before, laying or curbing the dust, which, no doubt, prevented a worse explosion and a fire being started. As the rescue men neared Seven Right, they encountered considerable smoke. At once, fire-fighting equipment was brought to them in case they came upon the mine on fire.

Friday evening, at 6:30 the bright day had passed into darkness; along with it went the hopes for the twenty-three men unaccounted for. Women, children, and other kin went home bearing all their misery and despair. A few men and women, with a faint hope remaining, waited on, wishing for good news despite the findings inside. Then the bull wheels spun bringing the man cage upwards. Upon its landing, the gate opened and twenty-one live and happy men walked the earth again. Shouts of joy and happiness ensued as if no other tragedy around them had ever happened. The men not working in Seven Right had been found. News spread quickly through the coal community, and back to the mine rushed women, children, mothers, and all concerned to greet their own. An emergency hospital had been set up in one of the buildings in case there was a rescue. The survivors were hastily led to clean waiting cots and administered to in every possible detail to make them comfortable and happy. They were all heroes.

How did all this rescue come about? When the mine exploded in the new heading of the main entry, the twenty-three men in the other sections were not caught in the line of fire. They felt the air concussion and pressure along with some heat, and these factors let them know what had hap-

pened. Lee Getty, the boss and a certified man with leadership, and John McNeal, a doughty sixty-year-old Scotchman with years of experience in mining, made exceptional leaders. They rounded up the men from the rooms, told them the mine had exploded, and to follow them. The next step was finding a feasible place to barricade. The blackdamp was already silently creeping toward them like the much pictured caricature portraying death with her black robe, death head, and skeleton fingers reaching to get the living.

Suddenly they came upon the stable, the one, two and a half miles inside the mine, where the horses—munching hay in total darkness—were oblivious of impending death. Getty and McNeal immediately knew this was the ideal place to barricade themselves. Quickly they stacked the bales of hay in the large openings and plugged the small holes with straw and mud. The leaders gave counsel and orders that were carried out immediately. But there came an exception, and two of them died.

Among the group was a black preacher who felt that his faith could carry him through the poisonous fumes. He asked others who believed to follow, that he was going to the shaft bottom. Two others agreed and they were let out through the barricade and started down the entry. A few minutes later the men inside the barricade heard someone yelling and opened a hole. One of the followers of the preacher crawled through into the stable with barely enough life left to survive. The other two had died. The survivor told this story: that he was bringing up the rear as they went down the entry single file with the preacher in the lead. Not far from the start, the preacher fell, followed by the second man. The third one saw them fall, turned tail and ran back to the barricade. When the rescue men came up in search for survivors, they came upon the bodies of the two unfortunates.[2]

2. A similar incident occurred at Eccles two months later when two men left the barricade.

A HUMAN-INTEREST STORY

One of the survivors from the stable was a Russian with a pretty wife at home hoping for his rescue. When the news spread that twenty-one were saved, she learned that her husband was safe but was retained at the temporary hospital for a checkup. She rushed to the mine building where he was, dressed for the occasion. She wore colorful clothes, the waist being bright silk with baggy sleeves and clinking arm bangles. An eye-catching skirt accompanied the waist. On her ears she wore large circled rings in gold emulation. Seeing her husband lying on the cot, she fell upon him crying loudly for joy, saying, "I get my man back. Him, I love so much. Now, I have him back." While uttering all her endearments she was kissing him, he with his black face of two days, and black dust-filled mines clothes, which rubbed onto her pretty attire. Her tears, mingled with the black from his face, made quite a spectacle. No one laughed at her, because everybody respected her for her joy and ecstasy because "she got her man back."

SURVIVORS

Fetty, Lee
Fluchie, W.
Gregae, Martin
Green, J. C.
Harman, Sergi
Inch, Charles
Krust, Frank
Kurson, Mike
McCormick, Fred
McGraw, William
Neal, John
Neal, Walter
Phillips, John
Robertson, W. H.
Rudy, Mike
Snapp, Frank
Stanton, Allen
Trosky, Mike
Wiggins, Roosevelt
Yarashank, Alex
Zeman, John

VICTIMS

Bee, Lonnie
Carr, W. P.
Cutlip, Arch
Cutlip, Les
Dennis, John
Ester, F. D.
Flaherty, Joseph
Fonner, Charles
Fonner, Clarence
Froskoff, Wassal
Louch, Coy
Mahaney, Neal
Myers, Herbert
Myers, W. E.
Sell, T. J.
Stravensky, John
Thoma, John
Zapctarsky, Nick
Zemar, John

Chapter 28

Second Eccles

March 8, 1926

19 Dead

When March roared in like a lion in 1926 and settled somewhat to a low barometer, miners in the Appalachians were conscious that she was the month of mine explosions. In the big coal town of Eccles—large in comparison with most coal camps—many old-timers well remember the terrible disaster of twelve years before. Some of them continued to work in and around the two mines, No. 5, the bad boy, and No. 6, the good lad, because No. 5 in the Beckley Seam 580 feet down was the one that killed 190 men, West Virginia's second worst explosion on that fateful April day in 1914. The Beckley Seam—named for the nearby Raleigh County seat, only four miles away as the crow flies—was a high seam of over six feet with the best of coal. Above this was the Sewell Seam of lesser height but also excellent coal, and this mine above was called the No. 6 Mine. Both seams were "hot," but the No. 5 Eccles was the hottest.

Following the awful blast of fourteen (see Chapter 18), the original company sold out to the Wentz's interests of Philadelphia who owned the Stonega Coal Company. The Eccles division was a part of the Crab Orchard Development Company. The out-of-state companies gave the mines good old West Virginia names but "nary" a dollar of the state's capital was involved, and the state's only return was money from the laborers spending—and heartache from the tragedies.

On the evening of March 8, 1926, the twenties roared

again with the decade's seventh major mine explosion, and seven more to come before the decade ended.

The day shift had left the mine and a night crew of twenty-eight men entered the No. 5 shaft at about six o'clock. The two mines reached about two miles underground on the horizontal or level after leaving the shaft bottom. At about 7:35 P.M., the blast came blowing to the outside and wrecking the No. 5 shaft, tipple, and hoisting facilities. The concussion also went up and into the No. 6 shaft with its charge of blackdamp killing one man and very nearly killing several more who were rescued quickly and sent to the Beckley Hospital where they recovered.

Upon the detonation of the explosion, men outside began immediately to organize rescue parties. The chief of mines, R. M. Lambie, was notified in Charleston and started by automobile the circuitous route over Cotton Hill Mountain and over the dips and ridges that the highway followed at the time. He arrived at Eccles somewhat after three hours in transit to find that no rescue parties had yet been able to get to the shaft bottom of No. 5. In the meantime, doctors and nurses had arrived from Beckley by automobile over a newly built macadam road, the one used to this day. They administered to the stricken men from No. 6 Mine.

During all the excitement and heartbreak of relatives waiting outside, no penetration had been made to the inside of No. 5, four hours after the explosion. The roar of the explosion was followed by a sheet of flame and billowing smoke which left little hope that any one of the twenty-eight could be alive. Yet rescue men in mine disasters never quit until the last and farthest room has been probed in search of barricaded men.

Finally on reaching the shaft bottom, mine inspectors McGinnis and Lilly from Beckley, with the rescue team, found terrible wreckage. Loaded mine cars were strewn down the haulageways, slate falls on top of the cars and mine

timbers everywhere. The sump—a depth below the coal level where the cage lands—was jumbled with debris and filling with water since the pumps had been wrecked and water discharge lines broken. Such devastation left little doubt as to the fate of the men deep inside the mine.

Many hours had been lost getting to the shaft bottom and hours were lost clearing the main entry toward the area where the men had been working. The deeper the crews probed, the less wreckage they encountered, giving credence to the fact that one never knows where the impact of a mine explosion may go or what course it may follow. This one had, as many had done previously, blown to the outside.

Brattice cloth had to be strung and air courses repaired to dispel methane gas being rapidly generated and to rid the passageways of the deadly afterdamp. Since the rescue men had no oxygen masks, the rescue tasks were hazardous. About twenty-six hours after the blast, the rescue crews with Chief Lambie in charge came upon the bodies of two dead men with handkerchiefs over their faces trying to ward off the killing fumes. They were identified later to be Clyde Muncie and J. T. Click. At this point, Chief Lambie was overcome by blackdamp and collapsed, but was revived. Prior to finding the first bodies, the men found a sign saying "come to section right." Later they found a sign saying "third room." Later the body of L. C. Blair was found. A short distance deeper into the entry rescue men found a barricade and behind it were ten living men! They were: F. J. Davis, mine foreman, Charles Stouts, James Keith, and his son, Green Keith, J. W. Cales, Edgar McKinzie, Mike Lizari, T. B. Fridley, H. L. Bailey, and Grover Wolsun.

F. J. Davis, the night foreman, is credited with saving the lives of the nine men and himself. He felt the heat and steam from the blast but caught no noise or wind from it. Immediately he began gathering the men together telling them he knew there had been an explosion somewhere in the mine. It

took some ten minutes to collect the men, James Keith and his son, Green, being the farthest away running a coal cutting machine. Davis herded the men into a room and all set about building a barricade. They found some lumber along with the brattice cloth which they erected over the entrance to the room. Mud, rocks, and slate were used to daub up the cracks. Muncie and Click decided to try to get to the shaft bottom, but Davis begged them to stay. They went ahead despite his admonition and died about a hundred yards from the barricade.

The men settled in the barricaded room of about twelve by fifteen feet with plenty of water in their buckets—miners always take their drinking water in the bottom of their dinner buckets—and their lunches packed for the shift. Davis said that they could dig for more water underneath the rails if necessary, brackish as it might be. The men were hot from building the barricade and when quiet, they began to get cold from the standard earth temperature of about fifty-two degrees.

After a few hours Davis opened a temporary door of the barricade and sought to test the blackdamp outside. J. C. Blair insisted to go along. Some distance from the door they struck afterdamp, Blair collapsed and Davis stricken also tried to drag Blair to safety, but Blair died. Davis barely made it to the place where his buddies pulled him inside the barricade.

After this narrow escape, Davis informed the men to prepare their souls for Eternity and he led them in prayer. All the men asked for Celestial happiness. Later Davis heard the men continuing to pray.

Davis lauded as a hero and a man of leadership and good judgment said, "If the other men would have minded me, they would have lived."

After the rescue, the remaining bodies were located. Three machine men were found badly burned, but the last three found of the total eighteen men in No. 5 were most pitiable.

They were the bodies of Young, a single man, Edgar Clay, and another whose name was unknown. The bodies were dismembered and blown into the sump with all the debris. The bodies had to be pieced together, Young's body being the last found. All the bodies were sent to mortuaries in Beckley and prepared for burial. Relatives claimed and took them to their respective homes for interment. Two single men were returned to Virginia.

LIST OF DEAD OF ECCLES SECOND

Blair, L. C.—wife and five children
Clay, Edgar—wife and three children
Click, P. J.—wife and four children
Cyrus, William—wife and two children
Dickey, William—wife and one child
Hendricks, J. A.—wife and five children
Hilton, George—single
Holt, M. G.—single
Jeesee, Richard—wife and eleven children
Keith, George—wife and five children
Lybrooks, J. F.—wife and three children
Marlin, G. E.—wife and three children
Mullins, W. D.—wife and one child
Muncie, Clyde—wife and one child
Price, Arch—wife and three children
Russell, J. H.—wife and three children
Stanley, H. O.—wife and eight children
Wilkes, Arthur—wife and one child
Young, G. H.—single

Sixteen women were left widows and fifty-nine children were orphaned by the blast. Richard Jeesee left eleven children and H. O. Stanley left eight.

Today, Eccles continues to produce huge amounts of coal. No. 5 Mine in the Beckley Seam has about worked out its

lease or boundary. No. 6 Mine in the Sewell Seam with its modern processing plant is the mainstay of the Eccles production.

Chapter 29

Everettville

April 30, 1927

97 Killed

The monstrous Pittsburgh Seam, a killer of men, a source of fuel, a coal stratum that undulates through many counties in northern West Virginia and into Pennsylvania; a seam thick enough to drive a truck into; places where shafts must sink over six hundred feet to reach it while at other points, drift mouths may enter into the hillside to bring out the fuel on a horizontal plane. This seam has made millionaires of many men, paupers of miners' widows, derelicts and waifs of countless children, and living wages for thousands of workers. Between Shinnston and Fairmont the traveler can see the seven-foot thickness of this carbon stratum where the highway excavation has bared its bosom to the world.

Indian Creek, a tributary of the Monongahela River, in countless ages past, had cut a narrow valley through the plateau leaving the seam expendable at its base. Millions of tons of the coal eroded away and washed to the Gulf of Mexico long before the coming of mankind. Everettville was built in this specific Indian Creek, whose ravine is a typical canyon of the Appalachians.

The New England and Transportation Company opened a mine at the base of the mountain where the coal could be brought out directly above railroad level and dumped without additional transportation costs. In such cases tippling is less expensive. The seam, also at this level, was eight feet thick enabling the use of horses for gathering coal to the

main haulageways. The mine was gaseous, thereby termed as "hot."

At Everettville in 1927, April showers were flowering the hillsides and May Day and Mother's Day were near. Payday came on Saturday, April 30, and rain was falling, but the miners and their families looked forward to an extra treat from the pay envelope. The company store always prepared for the extras to be bought. Some of the miners would get down to Morgantown or up to Fairmont for a binge, Everettville being about halfway between the two small cities. However, miners were always happy when payday came to the coalfields.

The big mine worked that day, but several men "laid off" if they could find an excuse to prevent a red check at the lamp house on the next workday. The night men were paid early, and some of them were in Fairmont living it up. Prohibition was still the law, but moonshine could be found if the men wanted it and knew the right places.

The mine was somewhat unstaffed that fateful day with about one hundred and two men working inside and several on the outside, eleven of them operating the tipple. Quitting time was at five o'clock. At 3:25 in the afternoon the big mine with her big coal went up with a tremendous explosion. Over ninety men died at that instant and some others were fatally hurt on the outside.

The excitement of payday pleasures ended, and a horrible realization began with the jar and rumble of the black dust and smoke permeating the air and covering the hillsides where the miners lived. After an audible mine explosion, everything becomes very quiet for a few seconds, just enough time for the human brain to fathom the circumstances, debate with himself and try to deny the fact. Men in the offices and the company asked, "Did that mine blow up?"

Then pandemonium broke loose. Out of the buildings and homes poured the stricken people, shouting, screaming,

crying, some half dressed, into the rain, mothers carrying their children, some nearly large enough to carry the mother; other children are screaming and crying, not knowing why, but because the mother is crying. Toward the mine they go. At Everettville they had to descend a rugged slope to get near the mine, nevertheless, down the hill they went as if rescue of the miners under the mountain depended on them entirely.

The scene at the drift mouth was an ugly one. A tongue of flame had shot from the mine with a force that demolished the tipple where eleven men were working, two of them dying instantly, the others entangled in timbers and crumpled steelwork. Debris lay along the tracks and below the remains of the tipple. Railroad cars under the tipple loading were knocked over and away from the tracks. Mine timbers, mine cars, and stones flew from the mine mouth striking the hillside across the ravine, some parts flying as far as a hundred yards.

Providence, that mysterious hand of God, worked for a driver who thought he smelled smoke. He was inside the mine near the outside so he whipped his horse to a trot and came to daylight. Just as he veered to the side of the mine mouth, out came the sheet of flame that barely missed him and his horse.

A rescue team was quickly organized to go inside, a task that seemed impossible after such a blast, but shortly after the explosion another man rushed out stating that nine were inside unhurt, near the drift mouth. Immediately the rescue crew went in and brought them out safely. They had been in an entry that the explosion bypassed. A total of ten men had escaped death on the inside of the mine.

It is rarely told how happy are the relatives of those who are rescued. When these ten men came out safely to fresh air, quite a relief was felt by their loved ones. A rescue man always becomes a hero to his family and friends.

As nightfall shadowed the valley, hiding the newly budding

trees of spring, the crowds increased. The news had reached the outside world and spread rapidly. Since it was Saturday and no work until Monday for almost everyone, hordes of curiosity seekers started for the explosion site. There was no such news media as radio or television in 1927 and only one telephone from Everettville, which the company used mainly to get help and supplies. Just the same, when the news reached Fairmont, for instance, "the grapevine" hurled it up and down the streets in record time. Many of the townspeople had relatives and friends in the mine. The town populace was shocked and uneasy.

The sky cleared and the night turned very chilly. Fires were built in several places as close as could be permitted to the mouth of the mines. Men, mostly, stood by them talking and several women who would not leave until some news came from the inside. The women of the coal town prepared food and boiled coffee on the open fires all night to feed the rescue men. Some of the women, whose men were trapped or lost inside the mine, worked also trying to take the sting from their anxiety.

Newsmen reported that the women were exceptionally composed while waiting for news. They did not wail loudly or scream in hysteria as one might expect. At midnight the rescue men carried out eight bodies found not so deep inside the mine. At the sight of these corpses on stretchers, some of the waiting women collapsed, some screamed, not knowing whose bodies were found and fearing that one of them was a husband, son, or brother.

Rescue men found some more bodies late Saturday night and early Sunday morning but left them inside in order to probe deeper to try to find men who might be alive. Six rescue crews were inside working overtime. Other teams were on their way to relieve them, but slow transportation and communication held them up.

Governor Gore of West Virginia and Chief O'Conner of the

state police left Charleston Saturday night arriving at Everettville Sunday morning. Chief Lambie, of the State Department of Mines, had already arrived. State police detachments from Fairmont rolled in to assist the lone local officer who was trying to control the crowds. Finally, the area was roped off and order maintained, but the crowds continued to grow.

Sunday, May Day, dawned clear and bright with only a pall of smoke from the fires kept through the night hovering over the lower ravines. Invisible and inert over the valley and onto the hillsides where the miners' homes stood hung the dread, fear, and heartache of tragedy. A sobbing and hollow-eyed wife asks herself many times over, "What did my husband do and think all night inside that fire ravished mine, if he lived? Will they get him out alive?"

Six thousand sightseers came up from Morgantown and down from Fairmont and from small hamlets and crossroads. Many rode the train to Arnettsville and walked the cinder tamped railroad track the four miles to the scene. Others drove their automobiles over the dirt road which became a quagmire of mud. More of them became ditched or belly-bogged in the mud than reached the scene. Old time Paiges, Chevrolets, Overlands, Maxwells, Grays, and Studebakers were pulled out by farmers with mule teams and a heavy fee. Dr. Shepard of Fairmont State Hospital ditched his car and got more newspaper coverage than the tragedy of the four from one family who died in the mine holocaust.

By Monday morning the rescue men had probed a mile into the mine to find five men who had been in the mine at the time on a special detail and who might be alive. This five were not supposed to be as deep into the mine as the main working crew. The rescue men phoned to the outside that they had penetrated to within 700 feet of the place where the five were supposed to be at the time of the blow up.

Thirteen rescue teams were finally on hand and working in relays. On Sunday these men strung brattice and cleared

passageways so that further searching could be done with better air. Luckily the fan had not been destroyed by the blast and forced air inside as fast as the airways were repaired.

At four o'clock Saturday afternoon, just after the explosion, the scheduled passenger ran out of Fairmont north on schedule but the Pennsylvania Railroad sent a special passenger coach loaded with doctors, nurses, and general supplies by the way of Arnettsville, hence on the branch line to the scene. A few ambulances had gotten into the coal town by highway. All other supplies needed were rushed by special train to Arnettsville where they were transferred to the branch line.

Sunday night, rescue men encountered a dangerous mixture of methane gas and blackdamp, which forced them to don oxygen helmets before penetrating deeper inside. Monday, rescue teams under the direction of Chief Lambie, came upon much heat and smoke. Further probing proved that the mine was on fire in the west section. Lambie ordered the section sealed off before other bodies could be located. Relatives of the trapped men stayed at the ropes hoping for a rescue, but the chief of mines stated that hope had vanished.

Tuesday, rescue men came upon four wrecked main line motors with all the operators dead. One was Harvey McCay, brother of Superintendent McCay of the ill-fated mine. Tuesday afternoon at 6,000 feet inside, they found the lone body of the mine foreman.

Wednesday came with the fire hampering and endangering the rescue crews. Two men had been overcome by blackdamp during the night, but were brought outside and revived. By Wednesday evening the rescue teams had carried out thirty-one bodies. The air tests showed 4.5 percent methane plus blackdamp. Thursday the teams spent most of the time sealing off the fire and hanging brattice. On May 7, eight days

after the blast, Chief Lambie reported the fire under control and the gas content reduced.

Saturday morning, one week later, news reached Everettville that another of the injured tipple men, Tom Daughtery, had died in a Fairmont hospital.

Sunday May 8, was Mother's Day, originated by Ann Jarvis of Grafton, West Virginia, a town only a few miles to the east of Everettville. Many mothers were in mourning for their sons lost in the Everettville catastrophe.

Chief Lambie reported the fire sealed off and that the remaining bodies would soon be recovered. During Sunday more than a score more bodies were found. Fifty-six corpses all were in the morgue or already buried. Two victims found were not known to be in the mine at the time of the blast.

On Monday, ten days after the blast, rescue men began bringing out bodies at regular intervals. A downpour of rain set in, but hundreds of relatives and friends stood under umbrellas, in raincoats, or just rain soaked, to learn whose body was on the stretcher. The corpses were covered and in a bad state of decomposition.

Not all bodies were recovered until May 13, fourteen days after the explosion. One of the last recovered was J. M. Pennington, father-in-law of Earl Erskine, whose body was found several days previously. Earl's father and brother also perished in the explosion.

Jerome T. Pyles was spared at Benwood in 1924 when he failed to go inside. He was also spared at Jamison by being among those who were inside but not in the explosion area. But the third time in an explosion he died.

On May 13, as the last bodies were being hunted at Everettville, an explosion far to the south in the Shannon Branch Mine on the outskirts of Welch blew up killing eight men.

VICTIMS OF EVERETTVILLE EXPLOSION

Alonzo, Mateo
Anderson, G. W.
Barnes, Aaron
Batache, John
Blackman, Ben, Jr.
Boland, Lundy
Brennen, Alf, Jr.
Brooks, Ed.
Brown, Henry
Burell, A. D.
Burgess, Frank
Burks, William
Burton, Comodore
Buzzard, W. D.
Campanelli, Tony
Campbell, C.
Casto, Nicholas
Carver, Clayton
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, E. C.
Davenport, Lank, Sr.
Davenport, Lank, Jr.
Davis, Roy
Diaz, Tony
Drake, Charles
Erskine, Cecil
Erskine, Earl
Erskine, William
Fields, Rufus
Flannigan, Sam
Fletcher, Paul
Foley, Mike
Frazier, M.
Goodwin, Frank
Gileis, Joe
Hill, John
Hodges, Moses
Hooper, Roscoe
Hunter, Will
Jackson, Allen
Jackson, Troy
Jones, Richard
Lamb, Bart
Lamb, Thomas
Laura, Fred
Little, Cam
Lowery, Frank
Mallory, Irvin
Maxwell, Oscar
Maza, Frank
McCarty, C. D.
McKay, Harvey
Montgomery, Noah
Morrison, Denzil
Morrison, George
Murdock, Bill
Murphy, J. B.
Murphy, Louis
Nairne, Lawerence
Napper, Stewart
Parker, John
Pennington, J. M.
Pertnobuh, Nick
Peters, Robert
Petus, Robert
Podlinck, Andy
Pyles, J. T.
Queen, Carl

Reese, William
Reynolds, Sam, Jr.
Rockovich, Pete, Jr.
Russell, Harry
Sanders, H. S.
Schaffer, Frank
Shoaf, Byron
Short, Thomas
Smith, E. E.
Smith, John
Smith, Richard
Stone, Martin
Streety, Jesse
Sullivan, T. E.
Taylor, Jim
Tippen, Bernard
Toothman, J. D.
Townsend, Charles
Underwood, Wilbert
Varner, C. W.
Ware, Frank
Weatherly, Tom
Willard, G. A.
Williams, Brooks
William, Harry
Wilson, Wade
Wright, Ralph
Ziman, Porter

EPILOGUE

Today the Everettville Mine is sealed. The town continues to house miners who work at other mines and in factories. A large wood schoolhouse with a spacious playground stands atop the plateau overlooking the ravine and the old mine site. Playing children can stop to look downward at the closed drift mouth, many of them the offspring of those who died under the mountain. Black people continue to live on "Pick Handle Hill" segregated from the whites at the time of the tragedy. Some of the widows of the Everettville victims live there yet.

A hard road runs from U.S. Route 19 at Arnettsville down Indian Creek to the Monongahela River. An old-timer, A. C. Hood, ran a store at the time of the explosion and knew almost all of the victims. He recalled seeing bandits running with a "heisted" payroll a few years previous to the explosion. They were caught.

A cemetery, with leaning markers, is across from the schoolhouse, so close that the pupils or teacher can read the names and dates from the classroom windows of those buried there. The graveyard was old when the mine blew up.

Chapter 30

Yukon

May 22, 1928

17 Dead

Silas Honaker, from over the mountains in Virginia, had worked prior to May 1928, in the Yukon Mines at Susanna. He put out a crop early and left his family at home to care for it while he went back to the West Virginia coalfields to earn some money. Fullen, his son, had reached manhood, had a sweetheart, a pretty country girl, over in Abbs Valley. Fullen wanted to earn money and maybe marry his girl in the fall or earlier if possible. Father and son came to Yukon and asked for a job. They were told that none was available, but maybe in a day or two an opening would come, maybe on the night shift. Silas and Fullen stayed at the clubhouse since they had walked over the mountain and down Big Creek, a long day's walk from home over a rocky road. Each day they went to the superintendent and inquired and on the fifth day they were hired for the night shift, to load coal. Another young man named Paul King was at the same hiring with the Honakers. They were told to see the mine foreman for assignment and catch the man trip in at 7:30 P.M. for the night's work. A motor pulled mine cars on which the men could also ride to the work headings.

Two coal cutting machine crews went in hours ahead of the loaders to make the cuts and shoot down the coal then leave when their work was done. Audie Lowe and Bernard Shamblin were on one cutting machine and George Miller and William Sayers were on the other machine in another room

some distance away. Audie Lowe was the son-in-law of George Miller, but they preferred not to work as a team because of their family relations.

At about 7:45 P.M. the motor was crawling toward the heading when the mine blew up. All the men on the cars were blown several feet away, burned to a crust, and some badly mangled. Two men were not thrown from the cars, but the sheet of flame charred them both. Devastation roared down the main entry of No. 1 Mine wrecking everything and causing slate to fall, blocking the haulageways and tracks. All air courses, brattices, stops, and overcasts were blown out completely disrupting the flow of air. Sixty men were in the mine at the time, but seventeen were in Mine No. 2 parallel to No. 1 and died immediately. Forty-three escaped uninjured.

Poor Fullen Honaker, with his youthful hopes and faith in his father's invulnerability, never knew what hit him. Not one of the seventeen were killed by afterdamp or asphyxiation. All died instantly. One second they were alive; the next second they were dead!

Yukon—also called Susanna—had no telephones. Word traveled as fast as a man could go by foot, horseback, or ride a train on its own time. A passenger train came up daily from the main line N&W at Iaeger seventeen miles down Dry Fork River, and ran miles farther upstream to Squire near the Virginia line. It unloaded mail, produce, fresh meat, chickens, etc., at each little place on its way. To get news in or out by train, was a poor process. Roads were unpaved and spring rains had left them impassable for an automobile. When the mine blew, the N&W station agent tapped out the news to a Bluefield station who in turn notified the Bluefield *Daily Telegraph*. Welch got the news in a similar manner. A reporter from the Welch *Daily News* attempted to take a car into Susanna by the way of Coalwood which required the crossing of two mountains. He barely beat walking time.

Rescue crews set to work immediately to penetrate the

mine despite ripped out brattices and fallen slate. Blackdamp stalled efforts until brattices were strung. By midnight they reached the wrecked man trip to find thirteen dead men. There should have been fourteen but Paul King decided he did not want to work at Yukon. Therefore, he lived to smile about his decision. At daylight the rescue crews found the last four dead men. One machine crew, Sayers and Miller, was burned almost past recognition, and it was assumed that their machine had set off the blast. The last two found, Lowe and Shamblin, machinemen, were not so badly charred. By daybreak all the bodies were laid side by side at the machine shop, set up as an improvised morgue.

May 24 dawned pretty and the bodies were laid outside the machine shop so that the two morticians from War, a town one mile above Susanna, could prepare the bodies. Some onlookers watched them open the veins of the corpses, drain off their blood in small vessels before pumping the embalming fluid into their bodies. The blood was taken to a spot near a slate pile and poured into small pits dug by helpers and then covered with dirt and shale. The morticians in turn washed the bodies as much as could be washed over with burnt flesh, and dressed them in suits or suitable attire for burial. The coffins were not on hand immediately but soon arrived on the baggage coach of the "short dog" passenger train. After all the bodies were prepared and coffined, they were carried by miners and helpers down the railroad track to the company store where relatives could claim them and have them shipped to their destinations.

Today the mine is no more. The drift mouth is covered over and piles of gob lie around with weeds trying to find some growing substance. The town is no longer company owned, but individuals have bought the houses and made them into better looking places to live. Some are fenced and flowers grow in abundance. The once big company store and office building is now a furniture store owned by individuals.

The mine is history and only a few old-timers remember the three tragedies that happened there.

LIST OF DEAD, YUKON, 1928

Boyhin, Joshua
Bravin, John
Brown, John
Fields, William
Holland, Enoch
Honaker, Fullen (son of Silas)
Honaker, Silas
Johnson, Reed
Lowe, Audie
Maliski, Joe
Miller, George
Sayers, William
Shamblin, J. Bernard
Wade, Will
Wakely, James (fire boss)
Weaver, Mack
Willkinson, Earl

Chapter 31

First Macbeth

September 2, 1936

10 Killed

Logan County, West Virginia, is famous for the colorful Hatfield Clan, for its enormous coal seams, and the beauty of the rugged Guyandotte Valley which twists across the entire county. Much legend is written and told about the beautiful Indian princess, Aracoma, who lived at the confluence of Island Creek and the Guyandotte. Her grave is supposedly in the courthouse square.

But the bad must come with the famous. The rugged river ran rampant over the villages, mining towns, and through the streets of Logan town to do terrible damage. Then came the horror of horrors when the Pittson Coal Company's slag dam broke in the head of Buffalo Creek and killed a known one hundred and twenty-seven souls on February 19, 1972.

Up to September 1936, the Logan Coalfields, one of the nation's greatest bituminous producers, had not had a major disaster, let alone a mine explosion. On September 2, 1936, at about 1:30 p.m., the Macbeth Mine of the Hutchinson Coal Company let go in entry 13 Right and killed ten men. The Logan *Banner* put out an extra with headlines that this was the first explosion in the county.

At the time of the blast, 120 men were working in the entire mine. The survivors were easily rescued, but great damage was done in the immediate area of the explosion. The mine was a slope with the mouth at exactly the valley level and precisely at the base of the mountain. Enormous cables

pulled the coal from the mine and dumped it into railroad cars a short distance from the entrance. Men could walk from the mine by the way of the slope.

County schools had opened and in a few days the colleges would start matriculation for the fall semester. Victor Corilla (also spelled Carrilloll) had pre-enrolled at Marshall College (now Marshall University) and was working out his tuition, books, and other college expenses. At the end of thy week he was discarding his mining clothes for the chic college clothes worn in those days. But fate and destiny had different notions and young Victor was burned to death in entry 13.

The coal town was near the mine and in a few minutes people had swarmed to the site. Rescue men quickly organized to go inside. News was telephoned to all outside towns and to Logan town, the county seat. Newspaper men from Charleston, the state capital, were soon on their way as were men from the State Department of Mines. Ambulances rushed from Man and Logan at once. Soon mothers, children, and wives were there and their cries could be heard above the noise of the crowd.

Rescue men entered the mine with oxygen masks and safety kits along with a couple of pull motors. They found that the explosion area was about two and one-half miles from the shaft bottom. A motorman and brakeman were found slightly injured and had no doubt been the closest to the blast area not to be killed. They were taken out and to a Logan hospital. Another miner named Ab Lambert was caught in the blackdamp and struggled, crawling and coughing, to safety.

Women from other coal camps rushed in and set up canteens to serve food and coffee to rescue workers and distraught relatives. Only an eyewitness can feel a little of the anxiety of a waiting relative outside a blast-torn mine. Wives with children crying by their sides made a pitiful scene; a mother awaiting word of her son is a sight beyond description.

tion. A stoic father or brother, a sobbing sister, breaks the heart of the helpless onlooker.

The Macbeth Mine was sunk in 1922 to a depth of 640 feet. By 1936 entries and headings had spread to over two miles from the main shaft. The name Macbeth, taken from Shakespeare's great tragedy of the same name, smacked of an ominous foreboding. Many quotations from the great play are prophetic of this mine's tragedy.

By four o'clock the following afternoon, the ten bodies had been removed from the mines farthest reaches. They were taken to Logan's morgues and prepared for burial. Victor Corilla's body was sent to his family in Indiana.

VICTIMS

Adkins, Jack—wife and five children
Corilla, Victor—single
Gadzitk, Andy—family in Europe
McShane, Julius—no information
Mounts, Gus—wife and one child
Refett, William R.—wife
Saunders, Ed.—single
Saunders, Grover—wife and two children
Tiller, Tom—wife
Watts, Elisha—wife and three children

Note: This manuscript has omitted the explosions of fewer than fifteen victims, but the first Macbeth explosion was a forerunner to a larger one six months later.

Double, double, toil and trouble
Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

Second Macbeth

March 11, 1937

18 Killed

The three witches met, not on the heath in Scotland but atop Guyan Mountain overlooking Rum Creek, a tributary of the Guyandotte, cooked their brew for their wayward son, Macbeth. But this time Macbeth was a black hole in the earth named for the Scottish murderer who usurped a throne. They did not throw into the pot, "the eye of a newt or the toe of a frog nor the finger of a birth strangled baby, ditch delivered by a drab," but the witches of fate tossed into the boiling cauldron the eighteen names of workingmen, making a living for their families and themselves.

On March 11, 1937, the Macbeth Mine blew up the second time in six months. The barometer was low and a March rain was falling. The scenes from September past were being re-enacted over again and some of the men who had helped carry out the bodies before were now mangled corpses in the same entries they had trudged over bearing a stretcher.

The wives and children, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, sweethearts, and others rushed to the level space looking at the gaping black mouth of the Macbeth slope that took a thirty-six degree angle for 640 feet to the floor of the mine. The women could only imagine and formulate pictures in their mind's eye how the entries and rooms looked where their loved ones were. Questions were rampant in the mind of a wife where his being or body might be. Was he lying hurt or dead against a wall of coal or was he barricaded in a room gasping and hoping to be rescued? The men who mined coal had an accurate picture in their minds of what it looked like inside the mine, and that the body would be sprawled as he fell and lying in complete darkness, and would only be

located when the strong beam of a rescuer's light splayed upon his corpse.

Like the explosion of the past September, before this one, the blast hit only one section of the mine about one mile from the bottom on 2 West 18 Right. Several men came out unhurt, some by walking up the slope. The mine had an escape ladder, screw type with 152 steps. Some men came by this route. As authorities and rescue men assembled, they soon knew where the explosion occurred. Most mines in 1937 had inside-to-outside telephones, and the names of the men in all the areas.

Mrs. R. B. Kimball came to the scene carrying her baby of a few months and three small ones hanging on her dress tail. Her brother, Tom Tiller, had died in the first explosion and her husband was inside and in the very section where this one blew. She was told this fact and asked to hope for the best. She remarked that she had faith and hope that her husband would come out alive. Finally a body was brought up, mangled but covered with a blanket. Mrs. Kimball was told as he passed that the body was that of her husband. She collapsed. Women came to assist her while many onlookers stopped their ears with fingers to keep out the screams and the wailing. She sobbed as she was led away, "He was so good to me."

Fred Tiller, another brother of Mrs. Kimball and brother to Tom, the victim of the September blast, was among the rescue men in the latter explosion. Fred stated that the second blow was much more terrific than the first. Timbers were blown out, slate fell in the main haulageways, and the task of getting the bodies to a main line motor over mountains of rock falls required about two hours per corpse. Many of the rooms had fallen in and new routes had to be cut to get to the dead.

A set of twins, August and Jack Tusek, were working the deepest or farthest away in the explosion area. Attempts to

reach them were foiled by fallen slate and rock. Finally after several days, a new tunnel or passageway had to be cut into the heading where the twins were. On the seventeenth day after the catastrophe, their decomposed bodies were brought to daylight. Immediately they were assembled in a double coffin and transported to one large grave.

The cause of the explosion was methane gas. Fire bosses reported the mine free of gas at a given time and safe for men, however, she blew just the same and with a terrific force. No little amount of gas blew with such intensity.

THE LIST OF VICTIMS

Brodocko, Tom
Field, Floyd
Fleming, Hubert
Forbes, Leonard
French, Sam
Fry, Joe
Gearheart, Earl
Gimo, Mike
Karns, Roland
Kimball, R. B.—
father of six children
McCoy, Troy
McCormick, George
McCrosky, Fred
Podlaska, Tuphon
Tusek, August — Twins
Tusek, Jack — Twins
Wiley, James
Yankovitch, Gazel

Today in 1976, the black ugly hole that is the slope into the Macbeth Mine is plain to the onlooker; no coal comes from her mouth and the area all around is scattered with debris and junk. To stop and look at her ugly mouth, one can vision the miners carrying the bodies across the level space to awaiting ambulances. Where is Mrs. Kimball now and those curious children, wondering what their mother was crying about? They are nearing middle age by this time and probably tell their own children about that awful day in March 1937, with the rain pouring down, when their grandfather of thirty-four years was carried dead from the explosion of Macbeth.

A new mine is being operated in the same seam. The name of the town and post office was changed to Yolyn. A mountain of red dog is stacked below the town, evidence of the millions of tons of coal brought up at Macbeth.

Chapter 32

Bartley

January 10, 1940

January 10, 1940, was one of those dreary winter days prevalent to the Appalachians with a cold drizzling rain steadily falling. The days were short at this time of year and men reported for work before daylight. Dancy Webster came to the lamp house that morning to get his light and check number when he met his boss who asked him to "lay off" and report for the night shift. Dancy, somewhat disgruntled, returned home. The day before, Goodman Richmond asked his foreman if he could "lay off" Wednesday and make it up Saturday. He was granted his wish. But the strangest coincidence happened to Terry D. Atwell, a young single man, who reported to the lamp house to find that no loading checks had been put on the board for him. Someone forgot to put them there, and Atwell assumed no work was intended for him that day.

These three men did not go to work in the Bartley No. 1 Mine on that day of all days because at shortly after two o'clock in the afternoon the west section blew up and killed ninety-one men. Terry Atwell's name was on the list of victims, and no one knew the difference until Sunday morning when Atwell happened by and told the official he was alive and happy for it.

The mine, a shaft sunk to a depth of about 600 feet to the Pocahontas No. 4 seam, was located at the mouth of Bartley Creek, which empties into Dry Fork River. Miners' houses were close, some living in their own homes and some in company houses above and below the shaft. The stream flows through a narrow, rugged, twisted valley between high scraggy hills resembling mountains more than hills. In summer, the area is covered mostly with deciduous trees and vegetation giving the area a pretty aspect. In winter the region has a rugged look with rock promontories jutting from the mountainsides. But on this January 10, the hills were dreary and the black slate piles seemed ominous to tragedy.

Two men were standing a short distance from the shaft mouth when one of them heard a small "squish" sound and saw a cloud of black dust mingled with papers come shooting out. The other man said, "I believe that mine blew up." He ran to the lamp house and office and reported his observations. A call went to the bottom, but the man below said it could have been a heavy slate fall that caused a lot of coal dust to go by. Then it was found out that the huge ventilation fan had reversed itself and then went out of commission. Only an explosion would have had that much force.

One hundred and thirty-eight men were inside when the blast came but forty-seven of them were in the east entry and did not feel or hear the blast. A motorman nearing the bottom said a heavy wind and a huge cloud of black dust swept over him. He did not know what had happened.

On top, it did not take long to find out that the mine had blown up, a thing all miners and mining communities dreaded. News spread quickly to the people of Bartley, English, Bradshaw, and other nearby towns. Relatives of the miners inside rushed to the scene not knowing that anyone might be saved and hoping that theirs were not in the blast entries. Rescue teams from the other Pond Fork Coal Company mines nearby were summoned quickly and soon were on hand to go below. There was only one telephone to the outside towns; it was out of order at the time and took about two hours to repair. Men also were assigned to put the fan back into operation before men could go inside. Everything

was a hubbub with people giving orders, men running for equipment, some cursing the events and weather. Women and children were screaming and crying and surging to the shaft mouth and getting in the way of workmen. School buses began to arrive unloading children of elementary and high school ages, some of them going to the scene of excitement before going home. Fifteen-year-old Agnes Stevenson heard the news as the bus was loading out from Big Creek High School at War. She knew that her brother, Pat Flannagan, a single man, had gone to work before she arose to go to school that morning. Pat died in the blast.

Inside the mine on the east entry where no fire, blackdamp, or concussion reached, the men were unaware of an explosion. However, Lawrence Mitchell, the section foreman, learned about the explosion, rounded up all the men and brought them out. It was near quitting time, but he did not let them know the circumstances until they were topside. The miners knew when they saw all the gathering around the pit. These forty-seven men had survived out of the 138 inside.

One of the first necessities in a tragic accident of this sort is to have law and order. Some law enforcement was close by, but not enough. People had to be held back and traffic controlled. Soon telephone service was restored and officers of all kinds, deputy sheriffs, constables, and state police, were on hand. The two-lane narrow highway became clogged with cars, hundreds of them trying to get in as close as possible. All spaces on the berm were parked up. A small bridge crossed Dry Fork into a narrow bottom which lies between the stream and railroad tracks that skirt the tipple. To get to the shaft, spectators had to climb an embankment or go through an underpass and go to the shaft from the backside. The bridge had to be kept clear for necessary coming and going. The entire county of McDowell responded with law officers and other help.

At four o'clock, daylight was beginning to fade. The first rescue squad entered the mine as the forty-seven survivors left it. They wore oxygen masks and all modern equipment. By this time they knew the section where the explosion had occurred and how many were trapped or killed. Officials estimated ninety-two. (They thought Terry Atwell had also gone to work that morning.) For the first mile into Main West not much damage was encountered. This entry veered on a curve to the left with branches leading off. When the rescue squad reached the mile point, they found slate falls, brattice down, and they came upon a motor with two dead men. One of them had been cut in half with his lower part under the slate fall while his torso was atop the motor.

The mine safety car of the Federal Bureau of Mines, which happened to be at Keystone, another mining city of McDowell County, was rushed by rail west to Iaeger and shifted to a branch line, thence south to Bartley. Railroad dispatchers cleared the right-of-way as quickly as possible. This federal railroad car carried the best of rescue equipment with trained personnel. In the meantime, rescue squads from mines in three counties with the coal companies' best equipment rushed by automobiles to the scene. In addition to the trained squads, the local miners were all experienced and were the first to attempt rescue. E. L. Chatfield, a state mine inspector, was on the scene quickly and led the first squad into the mine.

N. P. Rhinehart, state chief of mines, was attending a safety meeting in Pittsburgh when the tragedy occurred. He left immediately for Bartley. R. E. Salvati, vice-president of the Pond Creek Coal Company, rushed from Holden in Logan County to the scene and immediately started to assist in directing rescue operations. Mr. Salvati was an experienced miner, a former mine superintendent, who had advanced rapidly with his company. Reports of the time gave Mr. Sal-

vati top billing. A telephone system into the mine was rigged, and he kept in constant touch with the rescue crews.

At first, two rescue crews of six men entered the mine and worked four hours. They then came topside and rested twelve hours before being allowed to reenter. Their work not only meant searching for men, alive or dead, but they had to move obstacles and install brattices as they went. The farther they probed into the Main West the more devastation they encountered, and the slower the work became.

When the crowds gathered after the news spread that the mine had blown up, no one knew who was trapped, killed, or safe inside. Naturally the wives and families of all men inside were frantic. At four o'clock when foreman Mitchell led the forty-seven survivors from Main East into daylight, there was quite a commotion among relatives of the rescued men. Considerable joy was expressed by the fortunate ones and the dejection and frustration was pitiful among those whose men did not come out.

Night fell grudgingly in the narrow valley as if it wished the afternoon light could remain a little longer. The temperature dropped and snow began falling. The company officials set up a structure or canteen near the lamp house covered with canvas so the anxious relatives could see the cage come and go and be the first to see if one of their loved ones stepped to safety. To further assist, the company set up a soup kitchen in the lamp house[1] so that all workers, rescue men, and relatives could be refreshed. Spectators and curiosity seekers were not allowed in this area.

In the bottomland skirting the tracks and looking toward the shaft, spectators assembled. As night fell, fires were

1. A mine lamp house is the place where all records of the men who enter the mine are kept. Each miner is issued a metal identification tag with a number, his name, and an identical one is put on the board where the number is listed. He also received his electric head lamp.

built[2] one after another, even some improvised stoves made from oil drums.

Agnes Stevenson, the fifteen-year-old high school girl, kept going home to tell her mother there was still hope for the missing boy and for the mother to stay home while she, Agnes, kept vigil. Agnes's father was dead.

Finally electric wires were strung around the tipple and waterproof sockets attached so that light could be given all around. The glow from them showed the long line of cars parked on the berm across Dry Fork Creek. It was estimated that 2,000 people had congregated by nightfall on the first day.

As rescue men probed deeper into Main West toward No. 6 heading, they had hopes that the men in two other headings might have barricaded themselves off against the blackdamp, and could be found alive. However, much blackdamp was encountered and slate falls were massive. Brattice cloth had to be constantly strung. The rescue men wore oxygen helmets until air could be brought in to dispel the gases. The men had to work through CO gas and dangerous methane exuding from every rib of coal and a flourlike highly explosive carbon "bug" dust. Electric lamps, spark proof, lit their way. This was quite an advancement from back in 1905 when Foreman Brannigan led his rescue men into blast-torn Red Ash Mine on New River carrying whale oil lights, only to die in the attempt.

Wednesday passed and no live men or bodies had been found. The pitiful wives, children, parents, brothers, and sisters, hung on doggedly. Mrs. Floyd Combs, a young wife, after hearing the report from rescue men, left the canopy sob-

2. These golden circles of light gave off an eerie glow as one could see the comings and goings of people, trying to imagine the fate of those men deep under the earth's strata. The Red Cross and Salvation Army, braving the bad weather, came and set up canteens. No one was refused a sandwich or coffee by them.

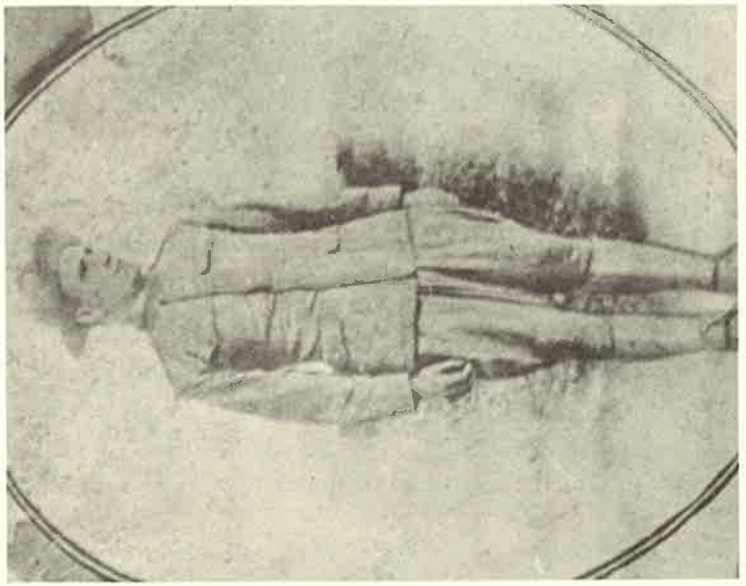
bing in despair. She collapsed in the snow. Friends carried her home.

Thursday passed into the night and no word came from below except that great difficulties were being encountered. Friday dawned clear and cold, typical of January, and the rescue men labored on. The list of the missing men had been given the newspapers and was posted at the mine office. T. D. Atwell's name was there, listed as P. D. Atwell. Friday night, bodies began to be found. The last 200 feet into No. 4 heading was well nigh impossible. Some of the bodies were under slate that took several days to remove. By Saturday almost all of the bodies were recovered, carried to the bottom, and laid out side by side. They were not allowed to be brought topside until all were found. Decomposition and putrefaction had set in but the bodies were continuously being sprayed with formaldehyde. Each rescue man carried a can of this disinfectant and when a body was found it was sprayed profusely before being put on the stretcher. One recovery man, a Mr. White, later a section boss at Bartley, said the stench was awful and the spraying did not fend off the odors for him.

One rescue man stated that he caught crab lice from one of the bodies, a young man, and that these parasites were ravenously hungry since they would not suck the blood from a dead body. He stated that it was a terrible sensation to be bitten continuously in his pubic hair by mites from a dead man's body, especially while carrying a corpse and both hands occupied.

The recovery crews came upon a battery operated motor that had been stalled but not knocked out of operation. The motorman was at his controls dead, and the motor had continued to run spinning its wheels on the steel rails until they were worn through and the batteries discharged.

Evidence showed that most of the men died instantly, but Mr. White stated that several bodies were found as if they were searching for a way to safety. It is evident that Ernest



J. M. Mullins and his young son, Charles, who died with him in the Bartley disaster, January 10, 1940. (Courtesy of Mrs. J. M. Mullins, Bradshaw, West Virginia.)

W. Hoops died of asphyxiation. His body was found on a slate pile, but he had torn a strip of paper from a rock dust bag, and written a note to his wife. It read: "If we don't make it out, darling wife, please take my body down home and have Rev. Spears to preach my funeral."

His last wishes were carried out. His wife took his remains to his boyhood home in Jackson, Ohio, where the Reverend Mr. Spears, who accompanied the body, preached his funeral. Preacher Spears was one of the forty-seven to survive the explosion by being in the east section on that fateful day.

One morning, five days after the blast, ambulances came in and all the bodies were brought from the shaft bottom covered with blankets or canvas, reeking of formaldehyde and putrefaction, and quickly loaded and wheeled away to Welch where a temporary morgue had been set up and additional morticians brought in to quickly prepare the bodies. When each corpse was ready for burial, his people claimed him and escorted his body home for a wake and a subsequent funeral at the family church, then taken to the place chosen for burial. Some funerals were held at the funeral homes in Welch and the bodies were then taken to the cemetery.

Mrs. J. M. Mullins of Bartley had to bring home her husband, Marion, and her son, Charles, both killed at the same time. Only three months previous she had brought the body of her seventeen-year-old daughter, Lucille, killed in a school bus wreck at War, into the same room. A small son, Jack, and another daughter, Jessie, recuperating from serious injuries in the same bus wreck, helped Mrs. Mullins bear her grief. The two were all that was left of her family.

The State Compensation Department dispatched men to the scene to aid the stricken families in getting help as soon as claims could be processed. The Social Security office in Bluefield also had its personnel on hand. Everyone was, at a time like this, his "brother's keeper."

What caused Bartley to explode? Only a few hours prior to

Lucille Mullins, who died in a school bus wreck at War, West Virginia, just three months prior to the deaths of her father and brother in the Bartley explosion. (Courtesy of her brother, Jack Mullins, Bradshaw, West Virginia.)

the catastrophe, air samples had been taken and all was well. But methane gas collected and blew the mine nevertheless. Rock dust had been used and the fine flour-like carbon dust did not ignite. Roy Ashworth stated that a large cloud of dust roared over him while on his motor. What if that dust had ignited? Bartley would have been another Eccles or Benwood or many such explosions that literally blew the insides out of the mines, shaking the earth, breaking window-

lights, and belching flame and great clouds of black smoke. It did not happen that way and forty-seven men survived.

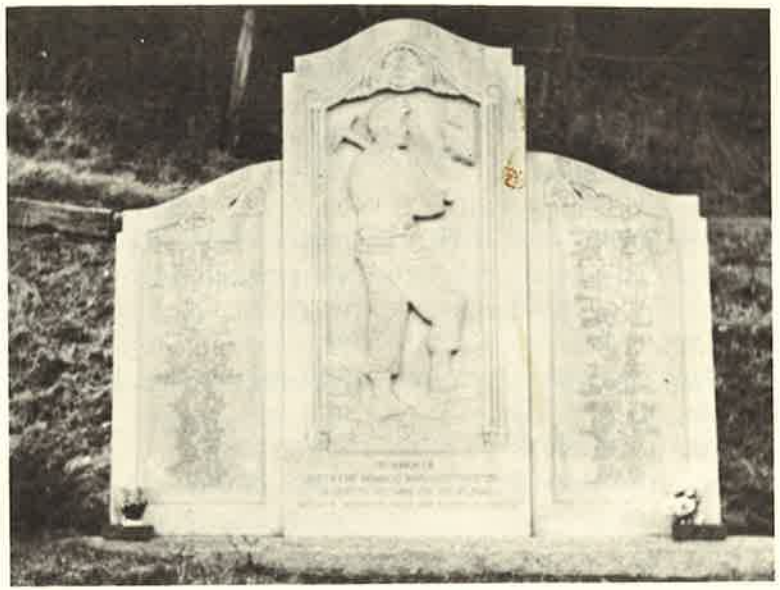
EPILOGUE

Today, there is no operation in No. 1 Mine shaft. A part of the old iron framework still stands, but the 600-foot holes straight down are sealed over and the observer does not know the exact spot where the hapless ninety-one came to daylight, unaware of their fate.

In order that the world will not forget these men, the United Mine Workers of America set up a granite monument to them in the steep churchyard beside West Virginia Route 83 in Bartley. All the men's names are inscribed thereon and the caption states: "In Honor of Ninety-One Members Who Lost Their Lives In Bartley No. 1 on Jan. 10, 1940."

VICTIMS

Anders, Thomas Claude
Avanzato, Concetto (Jim Vance)
Ayers, Kirby
Barnett, Alanza
Beavers, M. L.
Benjamin, Will
Branscome, Hobert
Branscome, Peyton Crockett
Busbee, Willie
Cole, Ernest
Combs, Floydd
Cox, Jessie L.
Cribb, Robert
Crisp, Millard Stanley
Crouse, William Albert
Davidson, Chester
Dixon, Judy Donald
Evans, Roy H.
Flannagan, Patrick
Fletcher, Earl Claude
Flood, Lee R.
Fultz, Robert
Fultz, Sanders
Garner, Malcom, Sr.
Garner, Malcom, Jr.
Garner, William Avis
Griffith, Garland Woodrow
Hairston, Lee
Hall, Lee
Handy, William
Harlow, Ernest
Harper, Felix
Hess, Crumbly
Hess, Dexter
Hess, John



Statue erected by UMWA in honor of those who died in the Bartley explosion. All the victims' names are inscribed thereon.

Hoops, E. W.
Howard, Bankie
Hyatt, Roy C.
Keen, Newton
Kester, James
Lazar, Mike
Lester, L. C.
Lester, Luther
Lindsey, John
Littleton, Autice
Marcum, Vance
Marshall, Varney
McGlothin, John H.
McGlothin, Wash
Meade, Gilmer Floyd
Meggison, James Emmett
Mercer, Mitchell Levi
Mills, Marion Garfield

Mills, Virgil
Mitchell, James V.
Moffett, Charles
Monoghan, Patrick
Mullens, Charles (son)
Mullens, Marion (father)
Oatneal, Clarence
O'Quinn, Clarence
O'Quinn, William Robert
Owens, Cleve
Perkins, Clarence W.
Pruitt, Thomas Howard
Ray, Miles
Sanchez, Santiago
Sigmon, Jack
Sigmon, Taxewell E.
Simpkins, William C.
Slone, Dave
Smith, Lee
Spangler, Herbert
Sparks, Alfred
Spence, Gentry L.
Spence, Robert
Stair, C. C.
Stiltner, Claude
Taylor, Clarence
Ticle, Joe
Underwood, Harry S.
Underwood, James Robert
Vance, Robert L.
Wallice, Tommy
Waters, Ernest E.
Wheeling, William Pershins
Witt, Lawrence
White, Jasper
White, Carlos
Wyatt, Charles G.
Yorke, Robert

Chapter 33

Osage

May 12, 1942

Osage, an Indian name, was given to a mining town in northern West Virginia on Scotts Run, a small tributary of the Monongahela River. This stream with its headwaters in Pennsylvania has every foot of its land underlaid with coal—big seams and good coal. The town is fewer than four miles from the medical center of West Virginia University at Morgantown, a city of twenty thousand. Neither the university's science and culture, nor the pretty Indian names, nor the beauty of flowering springtime on the Appalachian hills in mid-May could take away the tragedy of an explosion that killed fifty-six men, made of flesh and blood, at the Christopher No. 3 Mine on Tuesday afternoon, May 12, 1942.

About one hundred and twenty-five men inside the mine were scheduled to quit for the day at 3:00 P.M. The afternoon shift was to go into the mine and be at their working places at the same hour. A man trip of one hundred and fifteen men, riding the mine cars pulled by an electric motor, was barely inside the drift mouth at 2:20 P.M. when the power failed. The men thought this to be only a temporary stoppage and sat waiting. Some of the men walked back to the outside. Only a short time elapsed until notice came to the waiting men that the mine had blown up.

At the fan house an attendant was the first person on the outside to know that something had happened on the inside; he saw the fan run backwards by a force of air which knocked the belt from the huge blower. Only an explosion,

he figured, could do that. He then called the toolhouse reporting what he saw and the word spread at once. Unlike many other explosions, this one did come shooting from the openings, taking everything in its path and creating general destruction at the pit entrances. But at Osage more men were killed than at most explosions, despite the small "whoof" at the fan house.

Rescue teams from other mines rushed to the disaster as quickly as they could be assembled and transported. There is always the possibility and hope that some men will be found alive, and many have been saved by this practice. Almost all collieries have organized teams, drilled constantly on the art of mine rescue, on standby in case of trouble. Such teams from other mines on Scotts Run were the first to get to Osage. Some teams came from distant parts of the state such as the one from Kelleys Creek in Kanawha County.

These men, on their first probe into the mine, soon surmised that the center of the blast came from Right 1½ entry. Men from other sections of the mine were coming out, but several of them were affected by the blackdamp and had to be given first aid. Strangely, Mateo Alonza, who was working alone, walked out not knowing what had happened and asked what all the fuss was about.

Three miles underground in the 1½ entry at the heading, the blast was most terrific. Mine timbers blew out, and the roof fell in to the huckleberry roots, making it a horrible task to hunt for bodies. When rescue squads, working in groups of four each, penetrated near to the perimeter of the explosion by 10:30 that night, eight hours after the blow up, they found three bodies, the first one being the remains of Allen Jones. Farther on they located eleven more burned bodies. By 12:38 that night, forty-one bodies in all had been located. Twelve of them were discovered to have died of asphyxiation caused by afterdamp. Five squads began bringing out the

bodies to be placed in waiting ambulances and taken to Morgantown to be prepared for burial.

When news of the explosion on Tuesday afternoon spread, it was estimated that over a thousand people, some anxious relatives but most of them curious spectators, swooped upon the little coal town. Police were ordered immediately and a cordon was set up to hold people back from the mine entrance. The hillsides overlooking the drift mouth were covered with sightseers. A two-lane highway, U.S. Route 19, was the only road in and out of Osage. This route became so clogged that traffic ceased to move. The berm was narrow, allowing parking at some intervals, while the opposite side allowed none.

Women, children, and other relatives surged against the ropes hoping to get some news of their loved ones inside the mine. Some wept loudly while others cried silently with visible tears running down their cheeks. Some men and women prayed audibly, while others stood with hands raised in supplication, praying silently.

The Salvation Army and the Red Cross moved in quickly and set up canteens supplying food and coffee to rescue men and to the waiting relatives. Many onlookers and curiosity seekers helped themselves to a free sandwich and hot coffee while waiting to see the gruesome spectacle of dead men being carried from a blast-torn mine.

On Wednesday morning, the day following the tragedy, when forty-five bodies were loaded into ambulances bound for the mortuaries in Morgantown, the mine officials gave out information to the Morgantown *Post* that eleven more bodies were trapped inside the mine. The word "trapped" gave some hope that these men might be alive somewhere behind a barricade. However, the rescue men knew better. As they penetrated deeper into 1½ Right the devastation became much worse. Timbers were all blown out, brattice work all gone with air courses completely disrupted. This was evi-

dence that the explosion had started at the heading of or near to 1½ Right. For a man to be living in this area would be a miracle. The work of digging into this heading began with the knowledge that the remaining bodies were located here under tons of slate and debris. This task took ten more days, one-half of a month since the explosion, to get to the last of the bodies. The last half mile took all the time, due to so much destruction. When found, all of the bodies were badly decomposed.

Governor M. M. Neeley of West Virginia ordered compensation men immediately to Osage to assist the tragedy-stricken families at once. He further declared that the Osage explosion was one of the state's worst tragedies and one of the most appalling in the nation's history. He admonished the state employees to speed the aid to the distressed dependents. Each widow was to get thirty dollars a month as long as she lived and remained single, and each child was to receive five dollars monthly until he reached the age of sixteen. In addition, the compensation department was to finance all burial expenses of the victims up to a specified amount.

One miner told an unusual story: He was running a coal cutting machine when the explosion came, and that he knew an explosion when he saw one. He said that a rock came whizzing at his head and that he ducked to the side of his machine when it barely missed him. Then he started running, and he vowed that he could really run fast. He passed other men yelling at them to get out of there. He came out safely, but he never knew what happened to the other men.

When the list of the dead was finally compiled, it was found that Frank Pauley and his two sons, John and Lionell, had died with him in the explosion. Arthur Cunningham and his brother, Homer D. Cunningham, died at the same time. The body of Alfred Wetzell was found in bits and pieces and would not have been identified but for his belt with his number tag. A. P. Morris, one of the victims, left a wife and eleven fatherless children.

Adrian Coulter and Bud Whitehair were the first rescue men to come upon dead bodies in the Osage tragedy. (Whitehair is now deceased, but Coulter still lives at Osage.)

VICTIMS

Adams, Darrell
Batton, Roy
Baughman, Allen W.
Belec, Tom
Brinegar, Thomas D.
Cannon, William J.
Cook, John B.
Cordwell, Thomas
Covert, Robert J.
Croaker, Berman
Crook, Alonza
Cunningham, Arthur
Cunningham, Homer D.
Delaney, Edward
Derinzie, Attilli
Donaldson, Douglas
Fagulla, Geo.
Foley, James
Frazier, Albert
Frield, John
Gasper, John Paul
Gattin, James
Henderson, Earl
James, Austin
Jefferson, Edward
Jones, Allen Jack
Lafferty, Basil Reed
Little, Harold
Marshall, Everett
May, Sam
Mayfield, Aubrey
Mayfield, Kermit
McCardle, Edward
McGee, John
McGee, Junior
McClain, Edson
Metheny, Floydd
Mills, Stewart
Minicheck, Nick
Mitchell, J. W.
Mongold, Fredrick
Moody, Harry
Morns, Don
Morris, A. P.
Murphy, Harold
Murphy, Hooland C.
Newhouse, William
Powley, Frank
Powley, John
Powley, Lioell
Shinko, William
Stone, Bruce
Turner, Russell Wade
Thompson, Hoye
Wetzell, Alfred
Wolfe, Dennis

Chapter 34

Pursglove

July 9, 1942

20 Killed

The Pursglove explosion is the largest one to occur in the month of July in West Virginia's history, a death toll of twenty men. On a Thursday afternoon at about five o'clock, a section in the Christopher No. 2 Mine let go with a gas explosion in No. 20 and No. 24 southface headings about four and one-half miles from the shaft bottom. There were seventy men in the mine at the time of the disaster, but fifty of them came out unhurt.

The Christopher No. 2 Mine is located on Scotts Run on U.S. Route 19 northwest of the city of Morgantown, home of West Virginia University. The mine was owned by the Christopher Coal Company whose chief stockholders were the Pursglove family. The mine had been awarded a certificate for safety for producing three million tons of coal without a fatal accident.

At the time of the blast America was in the heat of World War II and everyone was doing his best to produce and manufacture in order to help end the war. The enemies were already groggy and knew the war was drawing to a close. However, an enemy never quits until defeated which led mine inspectors and officials to suspect enemy sabotage of the mine, especially since the mine had been a safe one. The supposition was wrong; the mine just went up as so many had done in the past. The Christopher Coal Company was running

a streak of bad luck since their No. 3 Mine at Osage had blown two months previously, killing fifty-six men.

The day shift had all left the mine, and the evening shift entered and were at their working places. A fire boss had made his run before the shift and the board was marked OK.

In one section the men found that the electricity had gone off idling their cutting machines and motors. They all sat for awhile when the section foreman told the men to wait while he went to investigate. When he returned, he told the men to come with him to the place where they met to eat dinner. When they arrived, other miners had assembled there also. The foreman said, "Men, leave all your tools and come with me. Don't anyone get excited. It looks like there has been an explosion." He led his crew to safety.

Another section foreman got his crew together in a similar maneuver and brought them to the shaft bottom and to the outside. The two foremen had brought fifty men out. The twenty men in the southface heading were machine men or coal cutters and the others were loaders. When rescue men found their bodies it was evident that all had been killed instantly.

As soon as the news spread that the mine had blown up, people rushed to the scene, as in all such tragedies, especially the kin seeking news of their loved ones. At first it was feared that all seventy men had perished. Rescue teams were soon on hand and several mine inspectors who lived in Morgantown rushed to the mine.

The Red Cross set up tents to shelter the anxious relatives who waited throughout the night. Canteens were also set up to serve coffee and food to the rescue men and distressed families. Many others waited through the night also, and helped when and wherever needed. Law enforcement officers had to be on hand at all times.

The recovery crews brought the bodies to the shaft

bottom, but did not bring them out at once. These crews claimed that the distance was so far and slate falls so bad that they wanted to assemble all the bodies together at one time.

Friday afternoon, twenty-four hours after the calamity, the twenty bodies were brought to the surface where they were hastily loaded into awaiting ambulances and rushed to the undertakers in Morgantown. After the bodies were prepared for burial, the families claimed their own and took them to their respective places for interment.

LIST OF VICTIMS

Andy, Charles
Banton, Leslie
Boggess, Mike
Barnette, R. H.
Burchmore, J. P.
Boken, Gasper
Hickman, Wesley
Hillen, Vernon
Lambert, Ernest
Lawson, Charles
Malich, Andy
McDonald, Howard
Maurice, John
Nonderoff, James
Oliverid, Joe
Shafchon, Russell
Sherry, Richard
Taylor, Glen
Wilson, Edward
Wilson, John

Chapter 35

Lumberport

March 22, 1944

The explosion in the Catherine Coal Company Mine No. 4 at Lumberport, near Shinnston, was one of the most terrific and intense blasts to happen since Monongah. The death toll was light due to the small number of men in the mine. Since Benwood in 1924 and Everettville in 1927, no mine has blown through all parts of the mine; but one man said, "Lumberport nearly blew the top off the hill!"

The Fairmont *Times* wrote that the violence of the explosion was beyond the knowledge of most experts; the worst since Monongah. The force blew out of all three openings of the mine. It was a combination of gas and dust as has been the case of the most terrific ones such as Eccles in 1914 and Rush Run-Red Ash in 1905.

The way it happened and the causes were simple. A night crew went into the mine on Friday evening, March 21. (The equinox, first day of spring, the air light, barometer low, and the elements acting up.) In the right butt heading about 3,300 feet inside the mine, a crew was cutting coal with an electric cutting machine. At 11:00 P.M. the machine crew went to a room about 100 feet away where they regularly ate their lunches. When the machine operator went back to his work, he was blocked by smoke and could see the coal cutters afire. The power had been cut off the machine when he went to eat, but it was thought that the fire had started from a blown out cable on the cable reel machine causing a short circuit inside the cable. The cable reel was near enough to the

rib to set the coal afire. The men began fire fighting but did not have sufficient equipment to extinguish it.

The foreman rounded up all the men in right fifth and sixth butt heading and brought them out of the mine. Superintendent Holson and John Spiker, an experienced miner, who just missed death by ten minutes at Everettville in 1927, started into the mine, but Holson returned to the outside to direct the delivery of equipment and supplies to go inside to fight the fire. Undoubtedly gas had formed in the meantime. At exactly six minutes after one o'clock Saturday morning March 22, 1944, Lumberport blew like an atomic bomb. Fifteen men in another part of the mine probably never knew there was trouble in the right butt heading. Mr. Spiker made the casualty list sixteen killed.

Superintendent Holson and some workmen were in the machine shop near one of the portals when the terrible concussion came out the mine mouth. They barely escaped death by not being in the path of the flame that came from the drift like the picture of fabled dragons of old who vented their anger upon hapless humans by a spurt of flame. The scene was comparable to that of Rush Run in 1905 whose flames scorched the cliffs on the north opposite banks of New River Canyon. Two parked automobiles belonging to the miners were burned on the highway some distance away. Sixty-pound steel rails were thrown from the drift mouth. Mine trolly wires were rolled up in conglomerate wads and boomed to the outside. The blacksmith shop in the path of the blast was blown to bits and some of its equipment was thrown across the county road, through an underpass to another mine tipple. One electric starting box from a loading machine two-thirds of a mile inside the mine was found 200 feet from the drift mouth.

A miner walking through a haulageway carrying a sack of tools was smashed against the rib of coal and his clothes were

strewn down the entry way. Some of his tools were found 200 feet outside of the drift mouth.

Rescue crews rushed to the scene Saturday morning and all the local miners came in to assist. Law enforcement came in to rope off the area and hold back those who came to see and who got in the way. Relatives of the missing had to be assisted and kept from getting too close to rescue operations. The Red Cross came in and set up canteens. The officers of law enforcement reported that the crowds were most orderly and that the anxious and grief-stricken relatives, contained their hysteria in an admirable manner.

The mine fire became intense and rescue men were driven back as they tried to enter. Three of them were overcome by carbon monoxide. In every attempt the crews were driven back. Sunday came and no progress could be made and equipment could not be gotten into the mine to fight the fire. Monday the situation was the same or worse. All attempts to stop the fire failed. Tuesday the officials concurred and decided that the mine must be hermetically sealed with all bodies inside. This was done with the known modern methods and some time afterward the seals were broken and all bodies were recovered and sent to a Shinnston mortuary for burial preparation.

LIST OF VICTIMS

Ashcraft, Clen—married—two children
Barnette, Loydd—married—one child
Cohen, Harold—married—two children
Cohen, John—married—three dependents
Cutlipp, Hartzell—married—four children
Hayes, Noah—widower—eleven children
Metz, Charles—married—one child
Newman, Dan—married—one child
Payne, John—
Phillips, Oscar—married—one child

Schoolcraft, Grayson—married—three children
Senchine, James—married—one child
Shawhan, John—married—three children
Stout, Charley—married—three children
Stout, Silas—married—three children
Wagner, Charles—

Chapter 36

Havaco

January 15, 1946

The old-timers in and around Havaco in 1946 remembered well the tragedy of March 1912, when the coal town was named "Jed" and the mine blew up killing eighty-three men. Many of these unfortunates sleep on a barren hillside graveyard called "Little Egypt" sans mounds, or markers. The younger generation who worked the same pit have heard the story many times, some of them wondering if it would happen again. Thirty-four years had gone by since the tragedy of 1912 and the mine continued to dump coal from the Poca No. 3 seam into N&W gondolas and hoppers.

After the Jed explosion the coal company changed the name from Jed to Havaco and the post office department dropped the name of Jed and adopted the new name. Old-timers said that men shied away from the hiring there since the former name signified explosion. Later the original company sold its interest and men thought that Havaco was a good place to work. The company dwellings were close to the mine so the men could walk down the street and over the tracks to the pit. Very few men had to drive to work. Another advantage was that the city of Welch, the county seat of McDowell County with about two thousand population, was only two miles away with a colorful history and a good high school to which the pupils were transported.

Despite all the good characteristics, a bad one reoccurred on January 15, 1946, when the shaft mine blew up again, killing fifteen men. This time the old pit put on a spectacular

show with no modesty evidenced and no punches held. It was a tremendous explosion, surpassing all the other blasts registered in southern West Virginia. Ordinary explosions may never be felt or heard such as Bartley in 1940, but killing scores of men, but Havaco was heard for miles around. People in Bramwell over halfway to Bluefield felt the earth shake. The people of Havaco, just as the noon hour approached, thought that a "blockbuster" bomb[1] had struck them when every windowpane broke, sometimes the casement and sashes going, too. Doors few off their hinges and went flying away from the air pressure. The roar and report of the explosion was deafening and the noise of falling debris continued for several seconds.

The people, almost at once, knew what had caused all this consternation; that the mine had blown up again. The people of Welch also knew that a mine had exploded but were confused and uncertain which mine it was since Shannon Branch, another hot mine, lay just below the city limits. (Havaco was the above town.) The Havaco residents rushed outside immediately and looked toward the shaft. What a horrible sight it was to see the hoisting tipple blown away, the powerhouse destroyed, and the smokestack toppled over! But the worst thought of all was the knowledge that the mine had a full shift of men inside, over two hundred, maybe more, down in the bowels of the earth from whence came such a force. Everyone thought amidst the screams and cries of women and children, that not a living soul could survive inside a deathtrap like that one.

Contrary to most speculation a miracle seemed to pervade. In less than two hours following the blast, two hundred men came to daylight and walked unhurt to their homes to wash up. (The company washhouse had been destroyed.) First,

1. London, England, had been greatly damaged by German bombs in World War II. Such missiles were nicknamed "blockbusters."

when the shaft was sunk in 1909, the company sank an alternate shaft, in compliance with state law, to be used as an air orifice. This pit was near the main shaft and had a spiral escape stairway. The men working inside knew there had been an explosion since the air pressure was intense to the extent that they felt as if they were being squeezed by an invisible vise. Almost all of the uninjured men started for the shaft bottom.

In the meantime, mine rescue teams came to the scene in a hurry. Officials and men with know-how began planning a method to get into the mine since the cages and hoisting equipment had been destroyed. The fastest and surest method was to rig up an improvised hoist such as the one used at the Barrackville explosion in 1925, by attaching a muck bucket to a cable and lowering the men into the mine. Within two hours after the blast, inspectors and crack rescue teams were on the bottom. These rescue squads, from all the surrounding collieries, were equipped with the latest and safest paraphernalia and were brave enough to enter an explosion-wrecked mine. They were able, at this period of mining, to wade through CO and CO^2 gas and dense smoke. Only heat could deter them.

On reaching the bottom, these crews came upon the unusual; the explosion had started near the bottom of the hoisting shaft blowing to the outside instead of shooting back into the workings. This fact accounted for the devastation to the outside plant and the small number of men killed on the inside. The blast was mainly a dust explosion set off, no doubt, by an accumulation of methane gas. The mine had been well rock dusted deep inside on the previous night which accounted for the explosion not backfiring toward the headings and face and killing more men.

The rescue men soon found several injured men who were sent out first to the waiting ambulances. Clarence Hale, a young man of twenty-one, whose father died nearby, and

Lawerence Carper, were badly burned. Thirty-three other miners were found burned, some slightly and some seriously burned. The thirteen men killed instantly were soon located and carried to the bottom to be hoisted topside. Before the bodies were recovered, the men from the rooms and headings deep inside the mine began coming to the bottom. Some came to the top by the way of the stairway, a two hundred and fifty foot spiral, and others rode the muck bucket—two and three at a time. Within two hours after the blow up all the living were out on the way to their shattered homes.

The schedule was: The injured came out first, the living next, and finally the dead, their limp bodies slumped in a round muck bucket, four feet deep and three feet wide, swinging and swirling like a water pail from a hand-dug well, coming to daylight for the last time.

As the injured were brought out, they had to be laid on stretchers and well covered with blankets to await the loading into ambulances. Not enough of these vehicles were available to get all the injured at one time. Therefore the more serious were sent first and a double back was required to get the others. After the injured, then the dead were hauled to the morgue. To relieve some of the sting and weariness of this tragedy, the Salvation Army and the Red Cross came quickly and set up canteens to serve hot coffee, chocolate, and food to the survivors, rescue men, onlookers, and the anxious relatives.

The townspeople were all in a serious plight also with no windows, and in some cases, no doors to keep out the mid-January cold. These householders went to work improvising, such as hanging blankets and quilts, nailing boards, tar paper, and cardboard over the open holes. The company store, too, a half mile away from the shaft, was in shambles. All the big plate glass windows and small ones, too, fell into shattered shards. Canned goods, dry goods, and hardware went in every

direction from the shelves. Luckily no one was seriously injured in all this wreckage.

Two of the injured, Clarence Hale and Lawerence Carper, died in the hospital the next day of their burns. Several days later, Luther Tolley also died of burns.

The total who died in the blast was sixteen (the Bureau of Mines lists 15), but few explosions have let loose such force, jar, and noise as this one.

None of the bodies went to "Little Egypt" but were taken to the Welch funeral homes, embalmed, dressed in good suits, and put into modest caskets. The relatives claimed each one and placed his remains in a cemetery of their own choosing.

VICTIMS OF HAVACO BLAST

Alderson, Ira
Amburn, Ab.
Belcher, Earl
(mine foreman)
Bell, Ernest M.
Bell, Walter
Carper, Lawerence
Cooper, William
Gibson, James A.
Hale, Clarence
Hale, Cleve
(father of Clarence)
Miller, Albert R.
(assistant superintendent)
Morgan, Pete
Smith, John L.
Talent, Luther
Tolley, Luther

Chapter 37

Farmington

November 13, 1954

16 Dead

The Jamison No. 8 Mine at Farmington blew up back in January 1926 killing nineteen men and entombing twenty-one other miners who miraculously escaped. Again on November 13, twenty-eight years later, the Jamison No. 9 Mine at Farmington, on a Saturday afternoon, exploded again, just fifteen minutes before quitting time, killing fifteen men on the inside. At 11 P.M. a terrific blast came out the man portal destroying the fan, mine offices, and the washhouse, and killing one man.

This catastrophe in 1954 resembled a dress rehearsal and stage setting for the big play to be acted out in full in November 1968, fourteen years later. The Jamison interests felt that the rehearsals were too costly and sold the mine complex to one of the biggest coal producers in America, the Consolidation Coal Company.

Let's take a look at the big rehearsal. November was the month and thirteen the day fate chose to practice. Since it was Saturday, only sixteen maintenance men went inside. One man only was given twenty seconds to get to safety, but one on the outside was used for a backup performer, playing an odd role. He wasn't burned up, just mashed to death. Number thirteen was not chosen because of the number on the calendar, but because of the number of men as actors. Any other day than Saturday would have found over two hundred men inside and possibly all would have been killed.

The hour and the minute for the curtain to rise was 1:15. One man named Kapeton came outside ahead of schedule. He stepped from the cage, walked seventy-five feet toward the washhouse when the blast came out the shaft portal, accompanied by a sheet of flame, wrecking everything in its path. Kapeton was unhurt, but Howard Jenkins, thirty years old with a wife and four children, was in one of the adjacent buildings when some of the steel structure over the shaft toppled onto it, crushing him. While the gentle hand of Providence saved Kapeton, the brutal fist of Fate killed Jenkins.

Rescue men were assembled quickly, but had to go to the coal hoisting tipple and enter through a fourteen hundred foot slope, instead of entering by the five-hundred foot vertical shaft used as a man portal. These two openings were nearly two miles apart, causing considerable delay in attempting a rescue.

After probing to about forty-two hundred feet inside, the rescue squads encountered considerable CO gas and those without oxygen masks had to retreat. The remaining men began to run into smoke and much heat. The first crews retreated and two other fresh crews entered to remain their two hours since rules would not let these men stay longer. After several attempts to penetrate into the workings where the fifteen men were trapped, dead or alive, a state mine inspector returned to the surface to report that a fire of considerable magnitude was raging and attempts at rescue were becoming more and more hazardous.

Shortly after the explosion, crowds began to gather rapidly. Close kin to the trapped men were the first to reach the scene. Law enforcement officers roped off the mine property, allowing only those needed with official capacity to get near the tipple. The anguished and crying relatives were kept back and consoled as well as could be done in a tragedy of this kind. Knowing that their loved ones were in the mine,

with smoke boiling out its orifices, their griefs were heartbreaking to almost any bystander, kin or not.

At about nine o'clock that night the officials and inspectors pulled all rescue men from the pit stating that methane detectors showed a steady increase in the gas content. The fan was out of order and possibly could not have been run if it had not been because fresh oxygen would only fan the raging fire in the mine. The rescue men, however, were told to stand in readiness to reenter the mine if conditions could be seen fit. At 11:00 P.M. she really put on a show. This time she blew the man portal to pieces and almost everything around it. Some parts of the fan and the hoisting equipment were blown a thousand yards away. The washhouse and the mine offices were obliterated. After this terrific blast, all hopes for the fifteen men vanished. Rescue men were told to rest and report the next morning, Sunday, to see if any hope of entering the mine was evident.

On Sunday, November 14, the conditions seemed to have worsened. The mine was on fire inside and as the gas accumulated, there were intermittent explosions of no great intensity, but could be seen and felt on the outside. All day mining men, both company and state officials, conferred. Sunday afternoon they concluded there was one solution only—seal the mine with the fifteen bodies inside and smother out the fire. This was announced to the crowds, to newspapers, and all concerned.

Monday morning, November 15, 1954, the Fairmont *Times* headlined the story:

> Farmington Mine Becomes Tomb of Fifteen
> Rescue Efforts Abandoned
> Mine To Be Sealed

And the story followed.

The Jamison Mine No. 9 was one of the largest in the Clarksburg-Fairmont area. It mines the big Pittsburgh seam.

Horses no longer pulled coal cars to partings and to the cage dump. Big electric motors do the work now.

After six months, authorities were positive that all the fire inside had ceased. Men broke the seals and entered stringing brattice and taking air to the innermost workings where they located the bodies of the fifteen at various points on the stage being set for 1968.

LIST OF VICTIMS

Before, Charles
Carson, Charles
Dumire, Harry
Floydd, Harry
Fluharty, Charles
Gregor, Joe
Haliburt, George
Hartsell, Lonnie
Ice, Carrell
Kenner, Clyde
Kovar, Nick
Menas, Mike
Myers, Russell
Opyoka, Joe
Saunders, Lem
Jenkins, Howard
(killed on the outside)

Chapter 38

Bishop

February 4, 1957

Groundhog Day came on February 2, as usual. The old-timers on the West Virginia line and nearby Bishop, Virginia, said that if the knowledgeable little varmint saw his shadow, six more weeks of bad weather were bound to come. The next afternoon the sky clouded up and a cold gusty rain set in. At midnight, the third shift was already in the big mine of the Pocahontas Fuel Company, astraddle the state line. Men were at their working places, cutting, shooting, loading, and hauling coal to the tipple by electric motor. The barometer was low.[1] The fire boss had made his run, as required by state mining law, and marked up the section safe and free of gas. One hundred seventy-seven men were at work in all parts of the mine.

Rufus Trail, a motorman, came to the outside after making two runs and reported that something did not look right inside. There was a heavy accumulation of dust that looked as if it had been forced into the main haulageway by an explosion in some part of the mine. It was 2:00 A.M., February 4, Monday being only two hours old.

Men inside the mine soon realized that there had been an explosion and found that the elevator or cage on the Virginia side had become jammed. In a short while they began filing out at the coal processing drift on the West Virginia side, about two miles from the man entrance portal. It was soon

1. A low barometer, it is thought, has some relation to coal mine explosions.

learned that an explosion had occurred in the Piney Ridge section of the mine which is exactly under the state line.

The last word heard from the explosion area came from Raymond Owensby by telephone who stated everything would be all right if the smoke and dust would abate. However, this did not happen and Owensby died with the other thirty-six men in that section. By this statement it was evident that the blast had not been one of those terrific blows that guts the entries and rooms in a flash. One man just a short distance from the explosion said that it was just a "big puff of wind." When the bodies were found it was evident that most of them had died for the want of oxygen.

Mine officials passed out word that the men may have barricaded themselves from the smoke and fumes and could be rescued as soon as air could be restored to the section.

Despite the fact that the explosion had happened in the wee hours of the morning, word was sent to all relatives who could be contacted. Couriers were sent to homes in Bishop knocking on doors, letting them know the bad news. Those living in Tazewell, Bluefield, and other places were contacted by phone if possible. Radio news was being constantly sent out. Before daylight, hundreds of relatives and friends had collected at both entrances, the shaft in Virginia and the drift in West Virginia, waiting and hoping for good news. Daylight came and the cold drizzling rain continued. At nine o'clock the state mine inspectors and the company officials jointly issued a statement that no hope existed for fewer than forty men inside. Some bodies had been found and the location of the others known. Mortuaries from the surrounding towns of Tazewell, Bluefield, War, and others sent their ambulances to pick up the dead.

At five o'clock in the afternoon on the day of the blast, as dusk was setting in, the mine cars on the West Virginia side rumbled from under the mountain with the dead. Rescue and recovery men, tired, sad, and begrimed, sat on the cars with

lights from their head lamps throwing an eerie light on the scene. Flashbulbs exploded from all around and women and children screamed knowing that a loved one lay under the canvas on those black coal cars. Quickly they were loaded in the ambulances and taken for burial preparation. Another chapter in West Virginia coal mining tragedy was closing while the mother state of Virginia wept also.

When the investigation was set up to determine the cause of the explosion, the West Virginia Department of Mines headed the inquiry since the Bishop Mine comes under the jurisdiction of West Virginia. The coal processing plant is some two miles across the border in West Virginia as is the company store, mine offices, etc. A portion of the town straddles the line; however, the majority of the miners live on the Virginia side. At the time of the explosion, men entered by a shaft portal in Virginia. Today the miners enter by a drift portal on the West Virginia side since the workings underground have moved westward.

The investigation for the cause or causes of the explosion, found evidence that two wooden air lock doors used to regulate the air into the section had been left open, short-circuiting the air. Had either of these doors been open and the other closed no accumulation of methane gas would have collected, but when both were left open, the air stalemated and did not enter the workings. Gas accumulated and a spark from some wire, machine, or even the striking of a metal tool against rock may have caused the blast. Some witnesses testified that men were constantly being cautioned and alerted to the importance of keeping the doors shut.

One victim was found in a section of the explosion area where he was not supposed to be. No explanation could be given for this mystery. The same incident happened in the Carlisle blast of February 1951, and the Yukon explosion of March 22, 1924.

BISHOP 1957 VICTIMS

Altizer, Ralph—wife and five children
Bailey, Harvey—wife and five children
Carter, Walter P.—wife and two children
Chafin, Wallace J.—wife and five children
Coleman, Kern D.—wife and four children
Collins, Frank P.—wife and three children
Couch, Stacy L.—wife and three children
Crocket, Lowell—wife and four children
Dillon, Kenneth B.—wife and four children
Dudley, Robert L.—wife and five children
Farrington, Paul—wife and three children
Garsant, Sam—wife and three children
Gravely, Clarence—wife and ten children
Hicks, Kelly—wife and two children
Johnson, Dallas Carl—wife and eight children
Keene, Gordon—wife and five children
Kerns, Jack D.—wife and four children
Levito, Rovie—wife and two children
McGraw, Clarence E.—wife and six children
Myers, Sylvie—wife and two children
Nunley, Earl—wife and three children
Owensby, Raymond—wife and four children
Parnell, James L.—wife and five children
Rowe, Blaine, Jr.—wife and four children
Sancion, Manuel H.—wife and four children
Sefabaugh, Fred R.—wife and three children
Shell, Ed. R.—dependent mother
Short, Luther—wife and seven children
Smith, Jeffe R.—wife and three children
Thompson, James E.—dependent mother
Vance, Jesse C.—dependent mother
Varge, Joseph, Jr.—wife and four children
Viers, Hansel W.—wife and four children
Watkins, Ed. Lee—wife and six children

Whitt, Waller—wife and six children
Wright, Clyde—wife and eight children
Wright, Mack B.—wife and five children

The tragedy left 147 fatherless children, three dependent mothers, and thirty-four widows.

Chapter 39

Second Bishop

October 27, 1958

It was late October, squirrel season was about over in the Appalachians on the West Virginia-Virginia line. The fall rains were setting in, cold and miserable, and the autumn was likened to Poe's "Ulluame."

> The leaves were crisp and sere
> It was night in the lonesome October
> In the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir.

They had two or three games left of the football season down at Big Creek High which had boasted great teams and developed many outstanding college players. On the Virginia side, the boys and girls went to Tazewell High School and on this very morning, Bill Johnson, a former all-state and all-area player from Tazewell High, was in the ill-fated Bishop Mine. He died with twenty-one other men.

The night shift had come out, but in the Piney Ridge section 20 nine men remained to work overtime to clear up a slate fall. Fourteen day shift men entered this section and were working in second left entry, when at 8:20 A.M. gas was ignited which ripped through the area killing the twenty-two men. Robert Holt, one of the nine night shift men was far enough away not to be burned, but to feel the concussion, the pressure on his ears, and to see the smoke roll by. He could smell the acrid burning of something. He ran to an entry where other unhurt men were working. Mine Foreman Boden rounded up his men including Holt, fourteen in all,

and went toward a fresh air course. He found a telephone and called outside to let the officials know that an explosion had happened in one of the sections. Boden was told to wait for rescue men and to barricade off. He had already set his crew to doing this. Holt then went alone to the outside. Later he returned to help in hunting for the other twenty-two who, it was hoped, had barricaded themselves off from the black-damp.

Disaster news travels by tongue nearly as fast as by telephone. In a very short time crowds began to gather around the mine, trying to get in as close as permitted. Those who have men in the mine are somewhat insistent in their anxiety and must be reassured as much as possible. News by "grapevine" is always distorted and exaggerated. The first news stated that all inside were killed or entombed and the casualties more than they really were! But not too long after the blast, the motors hauling men on the coal cars came out. Others walked to safety. Finally one hundred sixty-six men were alive and accounted for. Twenty-two remained in the explosion area.

As the morning passed with its overcast sky and drizzling cold rain, the Red Cross and Salvation Army came in to set up canteens to feed the rescue workers and distraught wives and other relatives. Many law enforcement officers arrived to control traffic. It was estimated that by noon five thousand people had gathered in a narrow valley to see what the effects of a mine explosion looked like.

Rescue teams, in mine tragedies of this sort, are called immediately. These teams are miners themselves, who volunteer, train diligently, and go as quickly as they can assemble. Teams from other mines in the Tug River-Dry Fork area were soon on hand and entering the mine. Mine Inspector Coffandaffer was nearby and went inside with the rescue men.

At 10:00 A.M. the rescue crews came upon the bodies of eight men. Inspector Coffandaffer called by portable tele-

phone that all the twenty-two men inside were dead and that they would be brought to the outside in a few hours. He reported that air had to be restored to the section and some debris removed before proceeding. He further stated there was no fire in the mine. The news was transmitted to the waiting relatives.

Some bodies were found grouped together. Some were badly burned and some had suffocated or died of afterdamp.

At 6:15 in the evening, the recovery crews began bringing out the bodies. Unlike the explosion of twenty months before when a motor pulling coal cars, carrying the dead accompanied by the rescue crews, came to the outside, these bodies, this time, were carried by hand, four men to a stretcher. What a somber sight to see men blackened by coal dust, with electric lamps on their hats, come from a dark hole in the ground with a burden under a canvas covering or blanketed, blackened by coal dust, a lump of clay molded by God and living a few hours before and now in eternity. One wife collapsed at the knowledge that the lump on the stretcher was her husband.

Ambulances whisked the bodies away to the mortuaries. The next day was Tuesday and the children, except those closely related to the dead, were sent back to school. A restoration to normal as quickly as possible seemed the best way. However, many funerals were held in Bishop at the local community church.

Investigation into the cause of the blast was set for Tuesday, following the explosion on Monday, but the chief of mines was called to Craigsville near Summersville where the Ogleby Norton Mine had blown up killing fourteen men. (See story of Craigsville explosion.)

One official stated that investigation showed that the explosion was caused by an improper shot. He stated that when the miner drilled into the coal, inserted his explosive, he left a part of the stick protruding. When detonated the part projecting blew against the roof where methane gas had

Coloso Wilson, a victim of second explosion at Bishop. (Courtesy of his widow, Rosa Lee Wilson, Bishop, Virginia.)

collected thereby setting off the explosion. Some miners agreed with this theory.

The United Mine Workers' headquarters in Washington was very critical of the Pocahontas Fuel Company's safety record. It stated that the Bishop Mine in 1958 had one of the worst accident records in the country. It, the headquarters, said that seventy miners had lost their lives in the Bishop Mine since 1954.

Another mine at Amonate, belonging to the same company, across the mountain on the headwaters of Dry Fork had blown up on December 27, 1957, killing eleven men.

VICTIMS SECOND BISHOP EXPLOSION

Adderson, Alex—wife and one child
Bandy, Fred Earl—wife
Beavers, Bandy—wife
Blankenship, Calvin (foreman)—wife
Dangerfield, Harold—wife and three children
Ferguson, Louis A.—wife and three children
Garland, Jack—wife and two children
Gates, John—wife

United Mine Workers monument to the men killed in both Bishop, Virginia, mine explosions.

Gillispie, Sam—wife
Hill, Arthur (shot foreman)—wife
Johnson, William D.—wife and three children
McKinney, M. D.—wife and one child
Nelley, James—wife and one child
Rutherford, Neil (foreman)—wife
Sexton, Kenneth G.—wife and five children
Spradlin, Ulysses D.—wife and one child
Stiltner, Norris—wife and three children
Sutherland, Holliday—
Valacha, Tony—
Wilfong, Albert—
Winninghann, Robert—
Wilson, Coloso—wife

EPILOGUE

Today, when you drive West Virginia Route 16 from West Virginia into Virginia passing through Bishop, you will see in

a pretty level spot a white limestone monument. This stone was placed there near the community church, by the United Mine Workers of America. As you face the stone you see the list of the names of the thirty-seven who died in February 1957. In the center is a symbol of what the men stood for. On the right is another list of twenty-two names: Those who died in a blast in the same mine and the same section in October 1958. A small plot is fenced off enclosing the monument and neatly kept by the minister who pastors the nearby church.

Chapter 40

Craigsville

October 28, 1958

14 Dead

An explosion deep under the mountain at Craigsville in the Burton Mine of the Ogleby Norton Coal Company killed thirteen men outright and burned four others badly on October 28, 1958, just one day after the tragic blast at Bishop, Virginia, in which twenty-two men died. (The Bishop, Virginia, Mine is a West Virginia operation barely across the state line.) The explosion came about 10:45 A.M. on another black Tuesday. Donald Davis died that night in a Richwood hospital of his burns. The total reached fourteen.

Craigsville is about sixteen miles from Summersville, the county seat of Nicholas County, on West Virginia Route 20. The mine is about one mile from the town. All but two of the victims lived in Craigsville and all were married but one. Thirty-eight children were left fatherless and thirteen women became widows. Gwinn Wyatt left a wife and nine children.

The explosion was caused by ignition of methane gas about one and a half miles from the drift mouth. Considerable wreckage and damage was done inside the workings. Other parts of the mine were untouched. There were fifty-four men underground when the catastrophe came, but thirty-seven of the men came out most of them unhurt. One man, Marvin Harless, was about one thousand feet from the blast area. He knew what had happened and started running for the outside. He encountered so much dust and smoke that he had to change course and try another route. He was

nearly suffocated but soon reached daylight and fresh air. The explosion concussion left him nearly deaf in one ear.

Rescue men were soon organized and entered the blast area since eighteen men were unaccounted for. By four o'clock they had found Artie Humphreys of Craigsville who had managed to stay alive and wait for rescue by taking refuge in another section of the mine. An hour later rescue men found three other men, two of them badly burned. They were carried out on stretchers which the rescue squad had laboriously carried inside with them in the event of finding injured men. Donald Davis and William Tucker were the two burned worst and were carried and wrapped in blankets. Davis died later in the Sacred Heart Hospital.

LIST OF VICTIMS

Adams, Ralph
Anderson, William
Bryant, Henry
Chafin, Don
Davis, Donald
Fletcher, Harry
Gates, O. C.
McVey, Joseph
Spencer, Kyle
Streets, Eddie
Stevenson, William Lee
Weese, Leonard
Westfall, Henry
Wyatt, Gwinn

Chapter 41

Holden

March 8, 1960

The catastrophe in the Holden Mine 22 of the Island Creek Coal Company on March 8, 1960, was not a mine explosion but a fire in the coal seam that created carbon monoxide gas which killed eighteen men by asphyxiation. No bodies were burned. Only twice before in this state's mining history had a fire killed a large group of men, one being at Villa near the state capitol in May 1918 killing thirteen men, and one at Pursglove on January 18, 1943, also killing thirteen miners.

Holden is a typical West Virginia mining town on Island Creek, a tributary of the Guyandotte River. There is a company store, offices of the company, filling station, and rows of miners' homes side by side. Steep hillsides overlook the narrow valley. At the confluence with the river, lies the city of Logan, county seat of Logan County.

Island Creek is also famous for being the home of the Hatfields who fought the feud with the McCoys of Kentucky. Farther upstream is the historical statue of "Devil Anse" Hatfield erected by the state of West Virginia honoring him as an outstanding pioneer. The graves of some of his sons, who died in gunfights, lie nearby.

This is not, however, a history of the colorful fighting clans, but the relating of a tragic event that left children fatherless and widows to weep for their mates and mothers to mourn for their sons.

Holden, a shaft mine, had tunnels or entries, at the time of the fire, as much as four miles from the pit mouth. On this

snowy March morning, twenty men went into the main heading. Not long after work began an enormous slate fall occurred in the tunnels between the twenty men and the shaft bottom. Undoubtedly a cable or trolley line was knocked down near a wooden timber and arced until the wood was burning profusely. No doubt, the timber was a dry seasoned one that burned readily. Almost all timbers as a rule are green and not flammable. Shortly afterwards the coal was afire. The men in the heading knew this, since a ventilation expert told the eleven men with him that he was going to attempt to find a way out. One young miner agreed to follow him, but the others decided to wait for fire fighters and rescue men to come in to get them out. The two men hunted for a circuitous route through old workings and finally came to safety.

As soon as possible, mine fire fighters went inside to extinguish the blaze but found intense heat and heavy smoke. Attempt after attempt to reach the fire failed. Luckily, no methane gas accumulated resulting in explosions as happened in 1954 and 1968 at Farmington. A further try was made to reach the men through an old abandoned slope into the mine on the other side of the mountain which faced the Kentucky border five miles away. This one failed also since cave-ins and pillar-robbing had destroyed all the tunnels and passageways.

At first the trapped men were able to call by mine telephone that they were safe and in good air. All looked hopeful since communication was established, but this was soon to end. The telephone went dead and it was known that the fire had reached the line and burned it.

Between the men and safety was a honeycomb of pillars supporting the roof since all around them had been depleted of coal. These pillars were to be "robbed" at a feasible time. However, the now raging inferno moved into the area of the pillars giving the fire a real impetus since more burnable surface was exposed. This misfortune really stopped the fire fighters. But reports continued through Tuesday and into

Wednesday that the fighters and rescue crews were close to the trapped men, but on Wednesday a new outbreak of fire thwarted efforts to reach the eighteen miners. At times Wednesday night the fighters thought that they had the fire contained. Six rescue teams entered the section, but the intense heat drove them back as they tried to skirt the fire. In areas where it had burned over and moved on, steel rails were found to be buckled from the high degrees of heat. Water forced into the hissing coal turned to steam. After the pillars burned out, the slate roof began to fall in, obstructing any passageway to the trapped men.

Officials of the company reported later that the eighteen men were in two crews, one being about 1,500 feet from the fire and the other 2,200 feet.

Thursday came and the fire fighters felt that they had reached a point where they could at last circle the fire and get to the men. A mine inspector and company official entered the mine Thursday and remained several hours to return to the surface and report the progress being made gave hope for an early rescue.

As daylight came up on Friday the situation was no better for those waiting outside, hoping for a miracle to bring out the eighteen alive. The rescue men came out Saturday evening to report that they were working two hundred fifty feet from the men but the heat had driven them back. Sunday, March 13, soon became another day of trial and frustration. Newspapermen became restless, fidgety, and disgruntled at the reports being handed to them by the officials; one stated there was much confusion in getting reports from rescue men. Reporters thought there were too many evasions and too many estimates saying when the trapped men would be rescued. Each time questions about rescue were asked, officials would state that they had encountered new obstacles. Smoke was one of the latest reasons given why the trapped eighteen had not been rescued.

Monday came, seven days after the fire began, and yet no men had been reached. On Tuesday, the eighth day, the rescue men reached the heading but found no men, dead or alive. The fire had been controlled enough so that rooms could be sealed off and fresh air forced deeper into the workings. Tuesday, at 3:00 P.M., they penetrated nearly to the main heading where the men had to be. At this point they came upon thirteen bodies, that had died several days previously from carbon monoxide gas, since none were burned or mutilated. One hundred and seventy-five hours had elapsed since the fire began. The first body found was alone. About two hundred feet farther the others were found, some sitting in a normal position, while some were found dead lying across each other just as they had fallen and died when the CO gas struck them. By Thursday afternoon all bodies had been found and brought to the surface where they were immediately taken to Logan for embalming and burial preparation.

Seventy-seven children were left fatherless by the holocaust. Roy L. Dempsey left nine children.

LIST OF VICTIMS

Adams, Charles
Ardis, Frank
Bevins, Ernest
Bryant, Okie
Carter, James
Chafin, Josh
Dempsey, Roy Lee
Donaldson, Bill
Hensley, Garfield
Hooten, Isom
Horvath, Birdie
Jarrells, F. L.
Marcum, Albert
Newsom, Melvin
Rundell, Jack
Sargent, Orval
White, Carl
Workman, Louis

Chapter 42

Dola

April 25, 1963

The hand of Fate and Providence seemed to work in a balance. Such was the case at Dola. A miner was ill and did not want to work the evening shift on April 25, 1963. He got Raymond Swiger to work in his place on that fateful night. The mine blew up two minutes before midnight and quitting time and twenty-two men died as quickly as a blast could leave a gun barrel. Swiger was burned to death.

Dola is a shaft mine 320 feet deep on West Virginia Route 20 which leaves U.S. Route 19 at Shinnston passing through Lumberport, scene of a previous mine disaster. The Dola Mine, belonging to the Clinchfield Coal Company, a branch of the nationally fourth-ranked Pittson Coal Company, had another opening across the mountain at Sardis. The latter was a slope used mainly for a man entrance portal. The coal is the famous (or infamous relating to mine explosions) Pittsburgh Seam which runs better than eight feet thick at Dola. Two sections of the mine were working that night when an explosion occurred in second right off southeast main. Thirty miners working in other sections of the mine came out uninjured. All in the blast area died.

Mine explosions are usually detected at once, even if no great noise, smoke, or fire leave the mine entrances. The Dola blast was not terrific in its concussion and did slight damage to the mine, even in the disaster area, but the flame was white hot. The Compass Rescue Team, named for the Dola-Sardis No. 2 competition, winning many honors, was not

long in entering the mine. At about three-fourths of a mile inside—from the Sardis portal—this team sent back word that they had 3.2 percent methane gas reading, enough to be explosive.

The sheriff's office was alerted and deputies were sent as soon as they could be roused from their beds. Company A of the state police at Clarksburg was notified and sent troopers as quickly as possible. Two captains of the Salvation Army rushed to the Sardis opening and began before daylight serving coffee and doughnuts to the rescue men.

As soon as it was learned where the explosion occurred in the mine and that twenty-two men were in that area, trapped or dead, the families of these men were notified. Relatives, mostly women, came to the Dola shaft, some of them bringing their children who were too small to be left alone. All of the men were married and the majority had two children. The wives were there long before daylight trying to learn if their husbands had been found unhurt. Spectators also began arriving at an early hour, especially miners who worked the day shift, and would be idle until the mine could be put back into operation.

Rescue men probed into the mine, stringing brattice cloth as they went. Late in the afternoon they began to find bodies, all burned badly. The first body found was only one-half mile from the shaft bottom, but the others were farther inside. By 10:30 P.M., Friday night, sixteen bodies had been brought to the outside, but three remained unidentified since they were burned badly and their belts with their identification tags were lost. Those identified were sent to different mortuaries for burial preparation. The identification was difficult since some of the relatives could not recognize their own kin.

When all bodies had been recovered, it was surmised that a continuous miner—a modern machine which cuts and loads coal continuously—had set off a spark or arc where methane

gas had accumulated. A later report was that the explosion was entirely gas. The force went down the entry powerful enough to mangle some of the bodies along with charring them.

All the victims were married men and most all of them with children. As a result there were twenty-two widows left and thirty-nine orphans. Two brothers, Glen Haught and Harold Haught, died at the same instant. Both had a wife and two children.

The State Mine Department had men on hand immediately who aided the rescue and recovery crews. One of the state inspectors told that his squad came upon one body completely nude. About him were no tools, dinner pail, nothing. The method used at Dola in body recovery was that the squad carried a plastic bag, chalk, and a detailed mine map. When a body was found, he was put into the plastic bag and every article including his mining tools, lunch pail, and any pieces of clothing. The roof over the spot where he lay was marked with an "X" and the squad leader marked the spot on the mine map. But in his case there was nothing, his naked body was among those so difficult to identify, since he had no leather belt and no metal identification tag.

In some cases the bodies were difficult to detect from a pile of coal or gob. The recovery men were instructed to carry a shovel and search into every hump or coal pile they saw. In a few instances this proved to be the charred body of a miner.

LIST OF VICTIMS

Aldridge, Adam—wife and two children
Bardarrek, Gunther—wife and three children
Bullaugh, William—wife
Burnside, Kenneth—wife and one child
Capbo, Ralph—wife and two children
Chapman, Elmer—wife and two children

Fincham, Dorsey—wife
Fowler, William—wife and four children
Grayton, Carsie—
Gregg, George—wife and two children
Hannah, Roy—wife and two children
Haught, Glen—wife and two children
Haught, Harold—wife and two children
Hawkenberry, Denzil—wife and two children
Kerns, Roy—wife and two children
Lester, James—wife and two children
Maxwell, Jim—wife and two children
McCoy, Ralph—wife and two children
Reed, John—wife and four children
Smith, Ralph—wife and one child
Swiger, Raymond—wife and two children
Welch, Robert—wife

Chapter 43

Farmington

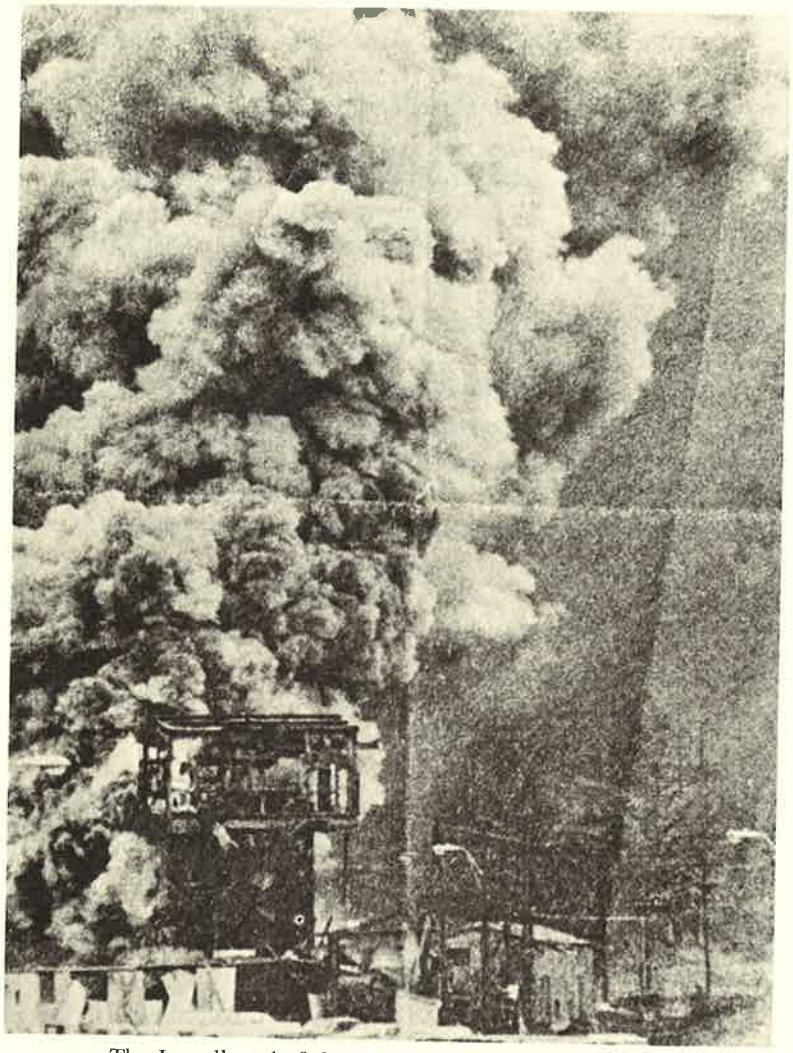
1968

The horrendous explosion that rumbled through the cavernous workings of the No. 9 Consol Mine in the wee hours of morning came on November 20, 1968, in the Mod's Run and Lewellyn shafts near Farmington and Mannington, West Virginia. Seventy-eight men died, either by fire, suffocation, or lack of rescue.

It is difficult and confusing for the reader to understand all the intricacies of this holocaust because of the giganticness of it all. First, the mine entries between the two farthest openings ran a distance of seven miles underground. The subterranean entries and haul ways ran hither and yon for fifteen miles. In addition, vast areas were worked out and pillar-robbed in this big Pittsburgh Seam since the initial mining began here about the turn of the century.

The Jamison interests mined this seam in and around Farmington for several years, suffering two explosions in the meantime. This company sold out to the Mountaineer Coal Company, a division of the huge Consolidation Coal Company. These interests owned and operated the big complex at the time of the last and biggest tragedy.

The entire working area of the mine covered up to forty-eight square miles when the last explosion in 1968 happened. This wide expanse, encompassing so many underground tunnels and working rooms, left hope that survivors had gotten away from the fire and blackdamp and barricaded themselves off from danger. The explosion, at first affected only about



The Lewellyn shaft lets go with all her fury on that November morning in 1968.

two square miles of the mine; however, the blast occurred in the part where the entire ninety men were working. A few of them were on the border of the blast area. Interlaced under this hilly country, the big complex had eleven openings, ten of them vertical shafts sunk hundreds of feet, and one slope, which was the central processing plant. This big number of openings further enhanced the chances of survival and rescue. The mine averaged about six hundred feet below creek bed level and was known to be a hot or gassy mine.

When the explosion roared out of the earth at about 5:30 Wednesday morning, red flames mixed with black smoke shot high into the overcast sky at both the Lewellyn and Mod's Run portals, the two eruptions coming simultaneously. Some of the miners at home were up and getting ready to go to the mine for the day shift when they heard the shotlike report of the blast and felt the earth jar. Those still abed were awakened by the earth tremor and the noise of the explosion, and they soon smelled the coal-burning fumes. Everyone then knew what had happened.

The intense heat from the Lewellyn portal set the automobiles belonging to the men inside the mine on fire. The fire department at Mannington was summoned at once but was to no avail.

Henry Conoway and Robert Mullens were at work in the motor barn near one of the shaft bottoms when the blast came. They rushed to the cage and were the first to be hoisted to safety. Seven of the survivors, Matt Menas, Jr., Byron Janes, Roy Wilson, Paul Sabo, Charles Beafore, Nick Case, and James Herron, were a mile from the shaft bottom. They ran for their lives toward the bottom just seconds ahead of the deadly blackdamp, and were hoisted outside uninjured.

Nine other men escaped death by a miracle. From deep inside the mine, they rushed to the nearest opening, the Mahan air shaft. However, there was no hoist over the hole or an escape stairway. By beating on the iron pipes leading into

the mine carrying electric wires, they finally attracted the attention of someone on top who spread the word and men went into action to rescue them. Workmen rushed a crane from Rachel, another mining town some miles away, over a narrow road to the shaft where the men awaited rescue or doom. An old-fashioned muck bucket, similar to the one used for rescue in the Barrackville tragedy of 1927, was attached to a cable and lowered to the bottom. Only two or

Men being rescued by crane and muck bucket at Farmington, 1968. (Courtesy of Fairmont *Times*.)

three could be hoisted at one time in such a small bucket. (See picture.) The men who returned to daylight and lived were: Robert Bland, Gary Martin, George Wilson, Charles Crimm, Bud Hillberry, Louis Lake, Alva Davis, Ralph Starky, and Nezar Vandergrift.

Another group of men were overcome for awhile by fumes from the blast and fire, but the air current shifted bringing oxygen to them. They made it to the bottom where they

nearly froze waiting to be rescued since the temperature on the outside was down to twenty degrees. They were: Nathaniel Stephens, Walter Slavikosky, and Raymond Parker.

After the rescue of the twenty-one men, conditions inside the mine worsened. Ensuing explosions and increasing smoke and flames belched intermittently from the portals. Fires inside were evident and had to be controlled or curbed before rescue teams could probe into the workings where the men were. To halt the fires, officials issued orders to fill the old No. 9 shaft (this one blew in 1901 and 1954) with limestone and any other available muck. Trucks began to accomplish the task.

In the meantime, workmen began pouring a cinder-concrete mixed slab over the top of the Mod's Run air shaft to smother any fire in the cavern-like workings underneath. While this attempt was being done at backbreaking speed, the Lewellyn shaft continued to pour out black smoke and poisonous fumes similar to an erupting volcano. Families in the nearby communities were constantly peppered by falling ash and soot. Occasionally the ground would tremble from another explosion. And seventy-eight men were still inside! Some of the householders, too close to Lewellyn, had to be evacuated since tests showed high content of CO gas in the smoke.

After filling in the old Consol No. 9 shaft and capping the Mod's Run shaft, Mr. Poundstone, vice-president of the Consolidation Coal Company, announced that hope of sending rescue teams into the mines was in sight. Preparations for the rescue team to go created more excitement; then came the "unkindest cut of them all."[1] A terrific blast, unbelievable in its intensity, blew the twenty-ton slab from atop the Mod's Run shaft, hurling it two hundred feet through the air as if a giant discus thrower of ancient mythology were competing

1. From Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar.*

against the gods. This caprice of nature seemed to signal the doom of the seventy-eight entombed men.

By this time smoke was pouring from five of the eleven openings. The rescuers were reluctant, however, to give up hope since many miraculous rescues have been made in gross mine tragedies. To attempt further to find living men inside, a drilling operation was set up, sinking four-inch holes—twelve of them, finally—into the sections of the mine where the men were supposed to be or to places where the men might have retreated. A highly sensitive listening device was lowered into the tunnels by the way of these holes and all that could be heard was the dripping of water and the occasional falling of rocks. Air samples were also taken through those holes and a high content of deadly CO gas was registered.

Finally, after a few days of conjecture, two rescue teams of six men each, readied to enter the mine from one of the non-smoking portals. John Ashcraft, later to become chief of West Virginia Department of Mines, was selected to lead the rescue teams who were fully equipped with the best known safety and testing devices. After about four hours of searching and penetrating to nearly four thousand feet, they encountered considerable CO gas and enough methane to blow the mine again. In other parts of the mine, during their probing, there came occasional "puffs" from slight explosions. One man stated, "They may not have been serious, but they sure scared the hell out of us."

After relaying the news of their findings to the surface, officials ordered them to come to the outside. No other squads reentered the mine at anytime during the tragedy. The fate of the entombed men was an evident reality.

John Corcoran, president of Consolidation Coal Company, met with other officials of the company in the office rooms in the rear of the company store, near the No. 9 processing plant on James Fork, and made their final decision. They

concluded that all seventy-eight were dead, and that the mine must be sealed in the same manner as it was back in 1954 when sixteen men were caught inside while a fire raged out of control. These officials sent word to the relatives of the entombed men and other concerned citizens to meet at the little Methodist Church, a quarter of a mile from the processing plant.

The small Methodist Church near the Consol No. 9 processing plant where the company president, John Corcoran, announced the sealing of the Farmington shafts where seventy-eight men were entombed.

The people concerned assembled in the evening, a somber time and in dreary weather. The lights inside dispelling the outside gloom and the fact that all assembled were in the House of God, relieved some of the despair of man's inevitable fate. Mr. Corcoran announced the decision to the weeping and praying people who felt that this pronouncement was coming. He was humble and brotherly in his statements, showing much compassion for the bereaved. However, a

vigorous protest of the decision came from Tony Menga, a high school principal from Plain City, Ohio, whose brother, Emetio Menga, was among the doomed men. Mr. Menga felt that the coal company had not done enough; that more holes could have been put down, and that foam machines for fire fighting could have been employed inside. He bantered Mr. Corcoran by asking, "Would such efforts as I suggested, cost the company too much money?" Mr. Corcoran walked away without answering.

After ten harrowing days, fifteen major explosions and four minor ones, the Farmington Mine sealing on Saturday morning, the last day of November 1968, was completed. Everything, but the usual comings and goings, became very quiet. The soot and smoke was gone but the blackened landscape remained; the anxiety lessened and left, but grief was paramount. The seventy-eight humans created in God's own image lay inert somewhere in the totally dark caverns of the Consol mine to await the day that mankind would kindly bring their bodies or skeletons to daylight.

LIST OF VICTIMS

Anderson, Arthur, Jr.
Armstrong, Jack
Ashcraft, Thomas
Barr, Jimmy
Beam, Orvil
Bingamon, John
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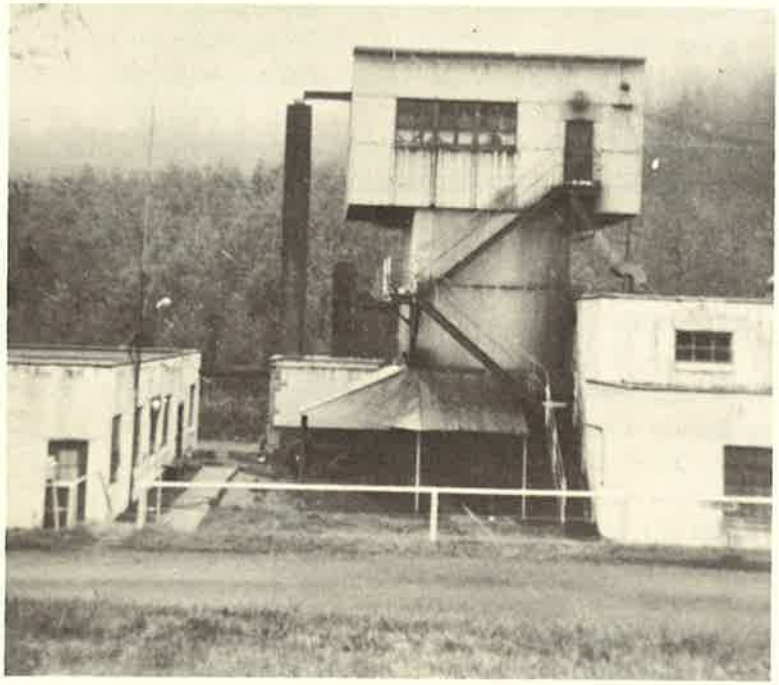

One of the sealed shafts at Farmington's No. 9 Consol Mine that continues to hold the bodies of twenty-three men—July 1975.

Lacy A. Dillon

The author is a native West Virginian, born and reared in the coalfields. He graduated from New River State College, now West Virginia Institute of Technology, with a degree in pre-law but turned to teaching due to the depression years. He taught history and English in high school, became a principal, was a state counselor in vocational rehabilitation for some time. His last school years were as pupil transportation supervisor for the Wyoming County school system.

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